

# LOUIS XVI AND MARIE ANTOINETTE

Before the Revolution

BY

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## PREFACE

ALL great movements which stir human nature to its very depths are necessarily complex in character and can only be understood when viewed successively from different angles. More particularly is this so in the case of the French Revolution, of which the history, comprised as it has often been in a single volume, is almost impossible to follow. In adopting this method the historian attempts too much at a time; dragging his breathless readers from the Court to the Clubs, from the Faubourgs to the Assembly, he succeeds only in producing a chaotic picture of the whole.

The plan I have followed is therefore to take up a different standpoint in each succeeding volume on the subject. In *The Chevalier de Boufflers* the Revolution was seen through the eyes of the best of the aristocrats, in *The French Revolution: a Study in Democracy*, it was watched from the street on the great days of tumult and from the standpoint of the people. Yet another aspect remains to be considered—the Revolution seen through the Palace windows by the King and Queen of France.

But before taking up this position so as to watch the unrolling of the mighty drama it is essential to understand what had gone before, the events that led up to the final crisis and the part played by Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette during the first fifteen years of their reign. Their lives during the Revolution will form the subject of a further work to follow soon.

This book is primarily a study of Louis XVI, whose real character few historians have even tried to examine. Indeed,

as far as I can discover, no complete biography of the monarch whose reign was the most momentous in the history of France has ever been compiled, even in that country. All that we have are a few Royalist *éloges* which appeared at the end of the eighteenth or the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Vicomte de Falloux's valuable but diminutive volume which first appeared in 1840, and the recently published monograph by Henri Robert. There is also the *Histoire du Règne de Louis XVI*, by Joseph Droz, which is however a history of the period rather than a life of the monarch; then the admirable work of the Marquis de Ségur, *Au Couchant de la Monarchie*, to which I am much indebted for the early history of the reign, but this is more a study of his Ministers than of the King himself and stops half-way, after the first Ministry of Necker. Between the early panegyrics, invaluable as records of facts but over-adulatory in their language, and the calumnies of revolutionary writers no middle course has been taken and no attempt made to see Louis XVI as a man, with human failings, human limitations but with qualities of an unusual kind. Above all, no idea has been given of the appalling difficulties he was called upon to face.

The fact is that there has never been a political party interested in doing him justice in France, where nearly all histories of the period have been written by politicians. None of the group of writers who defended his memory at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century—Charles d'Héricault, Gustave Bord, Edmond Biré and others—devoted a whole volume to the story of his life. Moreover, now that the elder branch of the Bourbons is extinct, the Royalists of the present day are nearly all Orléanistes, naturally disinclined to favour Louis XVI. It is thus perhaps in England that he may best be understood.

For in reality his conception of government approached more nearly to that of our own time and country than of his own. At a period when absolute monarchy was regarded in France and throughout the Continent of Europe as the only possible system, the young King, who believed that the sovereign should be the father of his people and should rule by love and not by fear, was an anachronism. If he failed to carry through this principle it was only by a hair's breadth; again and again he was on the verge of achieving triumphant success.

The time has thus surely come to readjust our opinion of that most unhappy monarch, to see him neither through the eyes of Red Republicans nor of intractable Royalists hostile to all schemes of reform, but in the broader light of modern thought. It may then be realized how illogical is the attitude of those Liberal-minded writers who deride Louis XVI for following, at the sacrifice of his throne and his life, that very policy of concession which they applaud as the height of wisdom when pursued by statesmen of to-day with so little risk to their own interests. At the same time, those of us who believe that policy to be fundamentally unsound and hold that rebellion should be put down with a just severity, may none the less accord respect to a man who, however mistaken from our point of view, showed himself ready to die for his political faith.

The inclusion of Marie Antoinette in this study might some years ago have appeared a work of supererogation; so much had been written on the Queen who, more than any other, has captivated the imagination of posterity that there then seemed nothing more to say about her. The masterly and impartial work of Maxime de la Rocheterie freely acknowledging her faults and imprudences, the collection of her letters edited by the same author in collaboration

with the Marquis de Beaucourt in 1895, and the researches of Imbert de Saint-Amand, Lenôtre and Pierre de Nolhac had exhausted all available sources of information.

But during the past few years a crop of fresh literature has sprung up on the subject, presenting Marie Antoinette under a very different and less favourable light than that cast on her by earlier authorities and purporting to justify the most scurrilous aspersions on her character by the evidence contained in newly discovered documents. What that evidence really amounts to will be discussed in this book and the one to follow.

It is not, however, the documents themselves, since these have remained unknown to the general reader, which have influenced public opinion in this country, but the fables woven around them by irresponsible writers with one eye on the shelves of the more popular circulating libraries and the other on the films. To all this farrago of distorted fact and disordered fancy no counterblast has yet been offered, and the public continues to accept as history what is in reality mere fiction. I have avoided any reference to these ephemeral productions in the course of a work to which matters of purely topical interest cannot be introduced; a calm statement of historical facts may best serve to neutralize their effect.

I would, however, take this opportunity to protest against the modern habit of introducing imaginary ideas even into the writing of history. That imagination should play its part in the portrayal of character and the recounting of events everyone will agree, but no historian has the right to invent words or incidents. Formerly a writer who liked to let his fancy play around historical characters had the honesty to call his book a novel, but now that one is no longer required to quote authorities, anyone can pass himself

off as an historian without the least regard for accuracy. If this practice is allowed to continue, each imaginative writer quoting another and adding something more out of his own head, history will become like the game of 'Russian scandal' in which a story started at one end of a group comes out at the other in a totally unrecognizable form.

As a believer in the necessity for documentation, I have therefore persisted in the old method of appending footnotes—the only method that has stood the test of time and given lasting value to the work of past historians. It is because they indicate their sources, because they quote chapter and verse at every turn, and because we know, even where this is not done, that their statements rest on a solid basis of contemporary evidence, that the works of such historians as Taine and Sorel have lived and will be consulted by future generations when the imaginings of many of our present historical writers have passed into oblivion.

In following the system of these great masters I shall have done my best to keep the stream of historical fact as clear as possible, and if, owing to the immense complexity of the subject and the difficulty of choosing between conflicting testimonies, I have committed any errors, it will not be for want of arduous research and the most sincere desire to discover the truth.





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# ERRATUM

Page 34, line 11.

*For* has frightened *read* had frightened.

## PRELUDE

### THE CANDLE GOES OUT

As one stands in the great Place d'Armes, vast and arid as an Indian *maïdan*, and looks at the dim red façade of the Château de Versailles, one seems to be looking at a dead thing, a thing that once breathed freely, that once pulsed with gay and vigorous life but that at some moment long ago received its death-blow and thereupon closed its eyes for ever. The splendid days of the Roi Soleil, the pageantry of gilded coaches coming and going across the Cour des Ministres, the brilliant uniforms of the royal guards massed in the Cour de Marbre when the King went a-hunting, the horses, sleek coated and magnificently harnessed, stepping across the paving-stones, are vanished like a dream. Only the shadowy background remains, the wraith of what was once the centre of the world's civilization.

Out of the many scenes enacted on this spot one recurs vividly to the mind. It is a fine afternoon in May, the 10th day of the month in the year 1774. Gazing across the vast courtyards, as we may gaze to-day, a crowd has gathered—a wondering, waiting crowd; guards, carriages and squires on horseback are waiting too. Close to the château in the Cour de Marbre the throng is thicker. All eyes are fixed upon a window where, in strange contrast to the spring daylight, a candle is seen faintly burning. Beyond the flickering of that flame a life is flickering to its close. The King, once the well beloved, now a fearsome image of corruption symbolic of the evil he has wrought in his latter days, lies dying of the smallpox. The last sacrament has been administered, his last words of bitter repentance have been spoken, by his bedside his three middle-aged daughters sit

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waiting for the end; when he draws his last breath the candle will be extinguished as a signal to the watching crowd outside.

At ten minutes past three the candle goes out.

The King is dead.

And to the hushed silence that has reigned throughout the château succeeds a sound of thunder—the feet of the courtiers passing over the parquet to hail the new King, Louis the Sixteenth of France. And at that sound the boy of nineteen and the girl of eighteen throw themselves on their knees, with streaming eyes, and cry: ‘O God, guide us, protect us, we are too young to reign!’

## CHAPTER I

### A HOUSE DIVIDED AGAINST ITSELF

THOSE who believe in the influence of the heavens over the destinies of human life might well declare that the royal pair, on whom the burden of monarchy had now descended, were born under an unlucky star. Evil omens had attended them from the beginning.

Louis XVI, formerly the Duc de Berry, third son of Louis le Dauphin and grandson of Louis XV, was born on August 23, 1754. The messenger carrying the news of the event to the Court, then at Marly, was thrown from his horse and killed on the spot. The birth of Marie Antoinette, youngest daughter of the Austrian Empress, Maria Theresa, took place on November 2, 1755, the day of the great earthquake in Lisbon. At the moment when the young Archduchess first set foot in the Cour de Marbre at Versailles a violent clap of thunder rent the air. During the celebrations in Paris on May 30, 1770, in honour of her marriage with the Dauphin—on the 16th of that month—a frightful disaster had occurred on the very spot where they were destined to meet their tragic ends twenty-three years later. A firework misdirected from the Place Louis XV—later to become the Place de la Révolution—set a heap of wood in flames. At the same moment the crowds converging at the entrance to the Rue Royale came into collision, and the firemen, thrusting them back roughly to reach the burning pile with their machines and horses, created a stampede in which no less than a hundred and thirty-two people were crushed to death and five or six times as many injured. The Dauphine, who had driven out to see the illuminations, returned to Versailles in tears, cut to the heart by the screams of the dying.

Was it some presentiment of coming disaster which inspired the young King and Queen to cry out on this 10th of May, four years later, that they were too young to reign? It is said that after that first appeal to Heaven for guidance the King threw himself into the arms of his wife, and pressing her to his heart exclaimed: 'What a burden! But you will help me to bear it.' And covering his eyes with his hands he repeated: 'What a burden! . . . At my age! And they have taught me nothing!' <sup>1</sup>

Far away in Vienna, Maria Theresa shared the same presentiment. The news of the death of Louis XV filled her with apprehension. 'I am very sorry,' she wrote to her son the Archduke Ferdinand, 'that the King and Queen are such novices; six years more would have been better for them. I fear this is the end of your sister's peaceful and happy days.'

What was the boy, now called upon to rule over the destinies of France? Five foot ten inches in height, heavily built but not yet too fat, with well-shaped legs, a pleasant ruddy countenance and pale blue eyes, of which the benevolent expression was veiled only by short-sightedness, Louis XVI at nineteen was not unpleasing. His voice, harmonious in its normal key, only rose discordantly under the stress of emotion. Unfortunately he walked badly, with the swaying motion peculiar to his family, trudging, instead of sliding smoothly after the fashion that was *de rigueur*, over the polished floors of Versailles. Compared with his predecessors, Louis XIV and Louis XV, he appeared unkingly. For Louis XV, despite his baseness of soul, had a nobility of aspect which had won all hearts during his early life. With his majestic bearing, his eyes of real 'bleu de roi,' his courtly manners, the Roi Bien Aimé had known how to charm not only the women who loved him but the merest bourgeois, whom he never failed to greet with exquisite politeness, should he happen to meet him on his passage

<sup>1</sup> Comte de Provence, *Réflexions Historiques sur Marie Antoinette*, p. 251



Louis XVI had none of these advantages. Simple, honest, kindly, plainly dressed in his unembroidered coat of brown or grey, he looked in no way regal. Great capital has been made of this fact, especially by democratic writers, yet to how many royal personages is it given to look the part? Certainly neither of Louis' fellow monarchs, George III of England, nor Frederick the Great of Prussia, presented a more imposing appearance; none the less they won the respect of their subjects.

The timidity that characterized Louis XVI at the time of his accession must be set down partly to physical causes. Eugenically, conditions had been against him. His father, the gentle, pious Dauphin, had died of consumption at the age of 36, saying on his death-bed: 'I am dying without having enjoyed anything and without having done good to anyone.'<sup>1</sup> His mother, Marie Joséphe de Saxe, struck down by the same malady, followed her husband five years later to the grave. His two elder brothers, the Ducs de Bourgogne and d'Aquitaine, had died at the ages of nine years and of five months respectively. Louis himself was delicate in childhood, and only by the age of sixteen had he begun to acquire the robustness and strength of muscle which drove him to find a vent for his energies in hunting, shooting and working at his anvil.

This passion for manual labour has constantly been made a subject for reproach and ridicule. In July 1773, the Comte de Mercy-Argenteau, the Austrian ambassador to the Court of France, wrote to the Empress Maria Theresa:

'Nothing the Dauphine can do can turn this young prince from his extraordinary taste for everything in the way of building, masonry, carpentering and other things of this kind. He is always having something rearranged in his apartments, and he works himself with the workmen, moving materials, beams and paving-stones, giving himself up for hours at a time to this strenuous exercise, from which he returns sometimes more tired than a day labourer who is

<sup>1</sup> Horace Walpole, *Letters* Letter of November 15, 1765.

obliged to do these tasks.' <sup>1</sup> Unfitting occupation perhaps for a future king, but not necessarily a proof of imbecility. Did not Peter the Great work with his hands in a shipyard? Did not Mr. Gladstone, like the present ex-Emperor of Germany, employ his leisure in cutting down trees? And has not Signor Mussolini been known to seek relief from the cares of state by threshing corn?

Louis XVI was by no means an ignoramus. His general education—carried out at first under the severe aegis of his father—had not been neglected. As a boy he was well grounded in Latin, learnt to speak German, Italian and English almost as fluently as French, read history and displayed a peculiar aptitude for geography. It is said that by the time he ascended the throne he had translated the history of Charles I by Hume, *Historic doubts on the crimes imputed to Richard III*, by Horace Walpole, and the five first volumes of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.<sup>2</sup> He had an excellent memory and grasp of things. For a time after his accession he seems to have shown little inclination for study, but in later life the love of books returned and he became an omnivorous reader; Fénelon and Telemachus were amongst his favourite authors. His strongest point was his remarkable common-sense, his weakest a deplorable lack of self-confidence. Contemporaries all display a curious unanimity by saying in identically the same words: 'Il avait trop de défiance de lui-même,' a phrase that can be best translated in the language of psychoanalysis by saying that he suffered from an inferiority complex. This is really the key to his whole character and conduct. But to trace this complex, as Freudians trace every complex, to sex, and therefore to his conjugal relations is to display ignorance of his early history. Louis' inferiority complex dated far back into his childhood; if indeed he was not born with it. Naturally timid and reserved, he could not be drawn out of his shell and made to play like

<sup>1</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, II 10.

<sup>2</sup> Soulas, *Mémoires*, II 42

other boys. His aunt, Madame Adélaïde, would try to rouse him by calling him into her room and saying: 'Come, my poor Berry, here you can be at your ease. Talk, shout, make a noise. I give you *carte blanche*.' But Louis still remained farouche and unresponsive. His younger brothers, the Comtes de Provence and d'Artois, both talkative and lively, further increased his sense of inferiority. A provincial orator having once complimented him on his precocity, the boy interrupted him by saying: 'You are mistaken, sir, it is not I who am clever, it is my brother of Provence.'

The truth is that none of the family were brilliant, and with the exception of the Comte d'Artois all were afflicted with a certain heaviness of mind and body. It must be remembered that they were half German and a quarter Slav—through their grandmother Marie Leczinska, daughter of the ex-King of Poland—and this ruder ancestry had endowed them with a brusquerie that contrasted sharply with the polished manners of the French Court. Louis XVI was painfully conscious of his inability to vie with the airy grace, the nimble-mindedness, the talent for persiflage and repartee that distinguished the noblesse by whom he was surrounded. With the people he was always at his ease; he loved them and he understood them. Even as a small boy he felt for their sufferings and habitually gave his pocket-money to the poor.<sup>1</sup> Often gruff and ungracious to the rich and powerful—'he was not fond of the great,' says Soulavie—he showed nothing but bonhomie when talking to peasants or artisans, drawn to them perhaps by his own taste for manual labour.

This consciousness of his apartness from the rest of his world filled him throughout his boyhood with a savage shyness he was never able entirely to overcome. His governor, the intriguing Duc de la Vauguyon, did nothing to inspire him with greater confidence in himself, and whilst instilling excellent maxims into his mind, never taught him how to be a King. Meanwhile his grandfather, who con-

<sup>1</sup> D'Allonville, 1 215.

tinued to refer to him as 'that poor Berry,' after he had become the Dauphin, kept him entirely outside public affairs. Whether Louis XV ever said 'After me the deluge!' is open to question; a more probable version of this famous utterance is the remark made in a tone of gentle irony a few weeks before his death: 'I can see well the workings of the machine, but I do not know what will become of it after me or how Berry will extricate himself (*s'en tirera*).'<sup>1</sup>

It was to this total lack of training in the art of kingship that Louis XVI referred when he cried out: 'They have taught me nothing!' And if at this crisis he turned to the young Queen for help, was it not that he recognized her superior understanding of the arts that grace a throne? For if Louis had not learnt to be a King, Marie Antoinette well knew how to be a Queen. All her training at the hands of her mother had been carried out with this one end in view—that one day she was to be Queen of France. For this she had been drilled, primed and prepared by the indefatigable Maria Theresa until the day she set foot on French soil, the finished product of ceaseless maternal care. Unfortunately her general education was by no means finished: she talked Italian charmingly and French fluently, but never learnt to speak it perfectly or to pronounce it without a slight German accent. Like all her brothers and sisters she had a distaste for reading, whilst her handwriting at the time of her marriage was hardly more than a scribble. To the end of her life she was never able to write French correctly; nor for the matter of that was Maria Theresa, although she habitually corresponded with her ambassador in that language. Spelling in those days was an art little known in the higher and even in the most cultivated ranks of society; Voltaire's orthography was not beyond reproach.

In spite of these shortcomings Marie Antoinette conducted herself with remarkable sagacity during the first few years of her marriage. Gracious and charming, she knew how to bear herself both as Archduchess of Austria, and as Dauphine

<sup>1</sup> Ségur, *Au Couchant*, 1 12.



at the Court of Versailles. Was she beautiful? On this point contemporaries differ, yet what do they agree in showing us by pen and brush? A tall slim girl, her head set splendidly on well-formed shoulders, exquisite arms and hands, a rather long oval face, tender blue eyes fringed with lashes darker than her hair, a noble forehead perhaps too high, a delicately aquiline nose perhaps too finely pointed, a small mouth with full red lips, the lower too full after the manner of the Hapsburgs, a complexion so dazzling in its rose and whiteness as to fill Mme Vigée le Brun with despair at the impossibility of conveying it on canvas. But it is above all about her hair that contemporaries grow lyrical, that abundant fair hair, variously described as 'blond cendré,' or as of a gold so pure that it held no hint of any other colour, and gave its name to a shade that became the rage of Paris. Still to-day in that strange city, where memories of the past confront one at every turn, the *grandes couturières* will display silk of an exquisite golden hue with the words: 'cheveux de la Reine, madame!'

It does not enter into the scope of this book to relate the history of Marie Antoinette from the beginning, which has been done *ad infinitum* and needs no recapitulation. The point here is to study the character of the Queen, to trace her influence over the King and the events of her time in order to realise how far she resembles the character that has been attributed to her by partisan writers. It will then be seen that the tendency of panegyrists and of libellists alike has been to endow her with too fixed a character throughout her life; in reality she passed through five successive phases so dissimilar as to make it difficult to recognize her as the same woman in each.

The first of these phases covers the period from 1770, the date of her marriage, to 1775—a year after Louis XVI ascended the throne. On these five years we have the minutest details given in her letters to her mother and in the secret correspondence carried on by the Comte de Mercy-Argenteau with Maria Theresa, the Emperor Joseph II and

the Prince de Kaunitz. The confidential reports sent by Mercy to the Empress remained so secret that Marie Antoinette never suspected their existence, for Maria Theresa, in order to conceal the true source of her information, was always careful to pretend that she had read in the papers or that a little bird had told her what Mercy said in his reports. 'That old fox,' as Madame Elizabeth later called the ambassador, showed little indulgence to Marie Antoinette, all his loyalty and devotion were given to his Imperial mistress, and he repeats quite unblushingly the confidences made him by the Dauphine under the promise that they should go no further. Here then we have a perfectly frank and unvarnished account of all that took place, an account never intended for publication and comprising details more intimate than those relating to any other queen in history.

Throughout this period we see Marie Antoinette, the Dauphine, as a good and happy child, saying her prayers every morning, going to mass daily, visiting her husband's three maiden aunts, and every few days sitting down in fear and trembling to write dutiful letters to the mother whom she loved but of whom she was mortally afraid. For did not nearly every letter from Maria Theresa contain some reproof or admonition founded on Mercy's secret reports of her conduct? And what are the points that form the subject of his complaints? That she is not careful enough about her appearance, that she will not encase herself in a steel corset, known as a *corps de baleine*, though after much correspondence she submits to this infliction. Another day the ambassador has reported that she is not German enough; she has not been as cordial as she should be to Germans visiting the Court. 'Do not be ashamed of being German to the point of gaucherie,' her mother writes. 'German blood runs in your veins,' etc. Then she must show more affection for Louis XV—'the King and the best of fathers'—and in this connection there recurs the perpetual question of the favourite. 'It is pitiable,' Marie Antoinette had written on

her arrival in France, 'to see the weakness he [the King] has for Mme du Barry, who is the silliest and most impertinent creature imaginable.'<sup>1</sup> The Dauphine must conceal her feelings on this point and be gracious to the lady whose mission, she had been informed, was 'to please the King and keep him amused.' To which the child had naively replied: 'In that case I wish to be her rival!'

The gravest reproach brought against the Dauphine, which occurs incessantly throughout this correspondence, is her tendency to '*dissipation*,' a word which must not, however, be translated by the English word dissipation signifying wild gaiety, even dissoluteness, but simply a love of distraction and a disinclination to give fixed attention to any subject. In the absence of an exact English equivalent the word, given in future in italics and inverted commas, must be read in French. Marie Antoinette's '*dissipation*' consists mainly in an aversion to studying with the Abbé de Vermond, who had been sent to Vienna in 1769 to finish her education in the French language and had returned with her to the Court of France. Then she is inclined to show impatience at the admonitions of the Comtesse de Noailles, whose complete lack of character and worship of the conventions had led Marie Antoinette to nickname her laughingly 'Madame l'Étiquette.'

But if the Dauphine's high spirits sometimes found a vent it is hardly surprising. In the time-table she gives her mother of her daily life there is little enough gaiety. Ceremonial visits, the ritual of the 'toilette,' from which she dare not depart, take up many weary hours. But she tries to occupy herself usefully. After midday dinner she says, 'I read or write or do needlework, for I am making a waistcoat for the King which progresses slowly, but I hope with the grace of God it will be finished in a few years.'

In the evening, after supper, whilst waiting for the King, she curls herself up to sleep on a sofa and only goes to bed at 11 o'clock. Almost every form of recreation is forbidden

<sup>1</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, 1 17



to this child of fourteen by order from Vienna. Mercy has complained that she is fond of dogs and has two that are far from cleanly in their habits, and 'if the number is increased this otherwise innocent amusement will not be without inconvenience.' Then she likes romping with children 'for whom she has a passion,' which takes up the time that should be spent in reading with the Abbé de Vermond. 'Unfortunately her first woman of the bedchamber has a boy of six and a girl of twelve, both noisy and untidy,' who 'spoil her dresses, tear and break the furniture and make disorder in the rooms.'

But the principal bone of contention is her fondness for riding, to which both Mercy and Maria Theresa object for the curious reason that it will spoil her figure and make her too fat. *At her age* they hold it to be most unbecoming. 'One cannot overlook,' Mercy writes to the Empress on November 16, 1770, 'the great objections there are to permitting exercise on horseback to so young a princess, and it is only at this Court that such an imprudence would be authorized.' This letter brings another lecture from Maria Theresa to her daughter: 'You are right in thinking I could never approve it at fifteen; your aunts whom you quote only rode at thirty. . . . You tell me that the King and the Dauphin approve; this is enough for me, it is for them to command you, it is in their hands I placed my charming Antoinette; riding spoils the complexion and in the end your figure will suffer and will appear fuller.' To make matters worse it appears that the Dauphine rode astride.

The Empress did not, however, find the approval of the King and Dauphin enough for her, but continued to remonstrate, though partially pacified by the concession that the Dauphine would substitute a donkey for a horse. Search was made accordingly for quiet donkeys warranted not to throw their riders, but that too proved disastrous, for the Dauphine took a toss. This was the famous occasion when, as she sat laughing on the grass, she refused to be helped to her feet, crying out: 'No, leave me on the ground, we must

wait for Mme de Noailles, she will show us the right way to pick up a Dauphine who has tumbled off a donkey!’

But this form of amusement soon palled, and Marie Antoinette, encouraged by the aunts, resorted to subterfuge. Riding into the forest on her donkey she would find a horse waiting for her, and jumping on its back leave her humbler steed behind. Indeed, before long she was following the chase on horseback, though in obedience to renewed remonstrances from Vienna she did so habitually from a distance.

Apparently any form of exercise, even walking, was disapproved of as fattening. ‘Her health,’ Mercy writes on October 20, 1770, ‘is perfect and she is acquiring slight embonpoint, this is attributed to the continual exercise she takes whether on foot or riding on donkeys.’ The punctilious ambassador complained further of her habit of descending the stairs of the Escalier de Marbre without assistance instead of on the arm of an attendant, and of going about the streets of the town—‘courir les rues de Versailles’—not in *grande toilette*. ‘She had hardly arrived at Versailles,’ Soulavie writes disapprovingly, ‘when she began to rid herself of every circumstance that imposed upon her any restraint. She went abroad on foot, accompanied by one or two ladies of her court, her gentleman-usher walking at a distance behind.’

Yet she well understood how to play her part as Dauphine. Even at fifteen, says Mme Campan, when passing through the long Galerie des Glaces on her way to chapel with the Court drawn up on either side, she saw at a glance those whom it was necessary to salute with a respect due to their rank, those to whom only a bow must be accorded, and finally those on whom her natural kindliness made her smile the more charmingly because they were not entitled to the higher honours.

There are countless stories of the Dauphine’s goodness during this period. ‘Her heart,’ says Mme Campan, ‘was always prone to compassion,’ and she relates how she was

found beside an old servant who had injured his hand whilst moving a heavy piece of furniture in her apartment, washing the wound from a bowl of water with her handkerchief that she had torn up for the purpose. Another day she had flown to the rescue of an aged peasant wounded by the stag during a hunt in the forest of Fontainebleau and driven him home with his whole family in her coach. And again when one of her postillions fell from his seat and was trampled on by the horses, she had watched over him for an hour, attending to his injuries, whilst waiting for the doctors to arrive.<sup>1</sup>

This sort of incident made her adored by the public; one of the most infamous libels published against her later admitted that at this period she was 'the idol of the people.' When on the 8th of June 1773 she made her official entry into the town of Paris—a ceremony that had been delayed owing to the jealousies of the Court—the enthusiasm of the populace was indescribable. Passing under triumphal arches, over the flowers strewn in her path, she had a smile for everyone—that radiant smile which went straight to all hearts. By her own order etiquette was abolished, the crowd, allowed to gather round her, clapped their hands, waved their handkerchiefs and threw their hats into the air in a frenzy of enthusiasm. At the Tuileries, where the vast concourse filled both the garden and the palace and the market-women were entertained to dinner in the concert hall, the Dauphine appeared on the balcony, and looking out over the surging waves of humanity cried out almost in terror: 'Mon Dieu, what crowds of people!' Whereat the Duc de Brissac, bowing gallantly, replied: 'Madame, may it not displease M. le Dauphin, they are 200,000 of your lovers.'

The Dauphin, stirred from his habitual timidity by this rousing welcome, felt no pang of jealousy; walking amongst the people with his young wife on his arm he knew that all these honours were for her, and on every side voices were heard saying: 'How lovely she is and how charming!'

<sup>1</sup> Confirmed by Comte de Provence, *Réflexions sur Marie Antoinette*, p. 250.

The Dauphine, striving to keep back her tears, repeated: 'Oh, the good people!'

At the theatre, where audience and actors alike burst into applause, at the Salon, at the fair of Sainte-Ovide, everywhere that they showed themselves in public, the same ovation awaited them. It was not only her beauty that charmed the people, but her goodness of heart that made them already look upon her as their benefactress. Thus, when in December 1770 the price of bread went down, they said loudly in the streets and markets that 'it was certainly Mme la Dauphine who had asked for and obtained this decrease in favour of the poor people.'<sup>1</sup>

Who can have invented the foolish story, beloved of British journalists—for it appears with almost the same regularity as that of Hermit's Derby—that Marie Antoinette, hearing the people had no bread, remarked: 'Then let them eat cake'? Presumably some Englishman, since cake, as we understand it, has never been eaten in France and is still regarded there as an English delicacy. Nowhere among the many French libels of the period do we find this anecdote. Its origin may perhaps be found in the story related by the Comtesse de Boigne of poor old Mme Victoire, one of Louis XVI's maiden aunts, who was kind-hearted but very stupid, and who, on hearing during a time of scarcity that there were unfortunate people lacking bread, said, with tears in her eyes: 'Ah, mon Dieu, if only they could be persuaded to eat pastry-crust!'—a form of nourishment which was the Princess's particular abhorrence

That Marie Antoinette understood the gravity of the bread shortage and the problem of the people's food is shown by countless anecdotes. It was said that one day as Dauphine, walking with her husband in the park of Versailles, she noticed a small boy carrying something in a bowl and, questioning him, found he was the son of a day-labourer taking soup to his family. 'Let us taste it,' said the Dauphine, and having done so and found it poor and thin, she turned

<sup>1</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, 1 108

to the Dauphin with the words: 'This is not tempting; yet it is human beings like ourselves, Monsieur, who have to feed on it.' Then taking four gold louis from her purse she gave them to the boy, and following him to the door of his parents' cottage was able to enter into the joy her gift had brought to these poor people, who threw themselves on their knees with tears of gratitude.<sup>1</sup>

The Dauphin did not need to have his sympathy for the sufferings of the people aroused, for it was always latent in his mind, but he lacked the quickness of perception which enabled Marie Antoinette to see at once what was the right thing to do. Mercy relates that one day in May 1774, before the death of Louis XV, the Dauphin came into her room saying that he had just inherited two million écus by the death of a pensioner who drew that sum from his privy purse

'But have you enquired,' the Dauphine asked quickly, 'whether he did not leave a widow and children or relations who are in want?'

Louis replied that he believed he had left children.

'Then his children should inherit and not you'

'True; you always remind me opportunely!' And the sum in question was made over to the dead man's family.<sup>2</sup>

In all Mercy's correspondence at this period we find no hint of the traditional Marie Antoinette, no accusations of extravagance, of excessive love for dress, of frivolity other than high spirits, above all of a tendency to flirtation of the mildest kind. Throughout these five years no breath of scandal came near her. The worst that Mercy can find to say is that she is too inclined to see the funny side of things and people—'from sheer gaiety,' he writes, 'and without any evil intention she gives way to pleasantry about those in whom she perceives anything ridiculous.'

In the matter of expenditure she shows herself almost

<sup>1</sup> Nougaret, *Anecdotes du Règne de Louis XVI* (1778), Part II, p. 8, and Montjoie, *Histoire de Marie Antoinette* (1797), I 66

<sup>2</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, II 142, Lescure, *Correspondance Secrète*, I 209.

parsimonious and makes no use of the permission given by the Empress to draw on Mercy for funds. 'Fortunately,' he writes, 'she is far from inclined to indulge in expense or fancies, the little money she asks for of her own accord is spent on alms distributed with judgement,' 'she prefers giving to the poor and does not give at random,' 'in general she inclines to a rather too strict economy'—such phrases occur at intervals throughout the correspondence from 1770 to 1774. Indeed, during those four years Mercy is obliged to admit that she has no serious faults. 'She has acquired,' he writes on November 16, 1770, 'a correctness of mind and a vision so beyond her years that I am often astounded.' 'There is not a day,' he says a few months later, 'that she does not give proofs of good judgement, of a singular correctness of mind'—this expression, '*justesse d'esprit*,' recurs again and again—'and of a good, generous and sympathetic nature.' He praises her frankness, her love of truth, and, above all, her kindness of heart which has won her the adoration of the public. 'In the matter of principles, character and judgement,' he goes so far as to say in 1773, 'Mme la Dauphine is so happily endowed that it is morally impossible she should ever fall into errors of any consequence, either in the present or the future.' Again and again Mercy finds himself carried away by admiration for her judgement and discernment—even at fourteen she 'has unravelled the character and qualities of the people who surround her with a sagacity really astonishing' in one so young. Again, three years later: 'she behaves really with more wisdom, prudence and success than could be expected at her age.'

She had need of all her prudence to find her way amidst the pitfalls that beset her in the hotbed of intrigue that formed the Court of Versailles in 1770. The old King, seeking to dispel his perpetual ennui, allowed himself to be ruled entirely by the du Barry, and even his grandfatherly appreciation of the Dauphine's charms roused the favourite's jealousy. His three unmarried daughters, known as 'Mesdames,'—Mme Adélaïde, Mme Victoire, and Mme Sophie,

whom he had gracefully nicknamed Loque, Coche and Graille—formed a society apart. Mme Louise, whom he called Chiffe, had become a Carmelite and entered the convent of Saint-Denis. Mme Victoire was kind and stupid, well disposed towards the Dauphine; Mme Sophie was a cypher. But Mme Adélaïde, the ruling spirit rather than the master mind of the three—for intellect she had none—detested the Franco-Austrian alliance of 1756, and whilst encouraging the Dauphine's visits could not forgive her nationality or the fact that she was now called upon to do the honours of the Court. With no older women to go to for advice except the futile Comtesse de Noailles, Marie Antoinette at first sought the society of the three old maids, little suspecting the traps laid for her by Mme Adélaïde, who was in time to become one of her bitterest enemies. Maria Theresa's letters are full of warnings against the danger of confiding in the aunts, warnings which the Dauphine's quick perception enabled her to appreciate, and she held her own so skilfully that by the end of three years she had brought 'Mesdames' outwardly to heel, and for the time being Mme Adélaïde found it prudent to conceal her animosity under a surface of extreme amiability.

The Dauphin's brothers further added to the difficulties of the situation. Louis Stanislas Xavier, Comte de Provence, born in 1755, sixteen days after Marie Antoinette, better looking and of more dignified appearance than the Dauphin, though soon too fat to be able to walk with ease, seemed by comparison with his elder brother a polished man of the world. But his superficial urbanity concealed a false and intriguing nature. At one moment he professed great friendship for the Dauphine and paid her long visits for the purpose of giving her advice, but Marie Antoinette instinctively distrusted him, and being unable to conceal this feeling ended by adding him to the list of her enemies.

The Dauphin's youngest brother, Charles Philippe, Comte d'Artois, born in 1757, was a very different character. Slim, elegant, with a face that would have been charming but for

his habit of keeping his mouth open, which gave him a rather foolish expression, he presented more than either of his brothers the appearance of what the French considered a prince should be. Without any pretensions to intellect, he rode, shot, danced and flirted with easy grace.

The Dauphin had also two young sisters, Madame Clothilde and Madame Elizabeth, aged respectively eleven and six at the time of his marriage to Marie Antoinette. Soon after this the royal family was increased by the marriages of the Comtes de Provence and d'Artois with the two daughters of Victor Amédée III, King of Sardinia.

The Kingdom of Sardinia comprised in those days the island of that name, and a part of Northern Italy, including Piedmont, of which Turin was the capital and seat of the reigning princes of the House of Savoy. Long pourparlers preceded the alliances between the Bourbon princes and the Piedmontais princesses, for Louis XV and his daughters had set their hearts on a third alliance with the House of Savoy by marrying Madame Clothilde to the Prince de Piedmont, son of the King of Sardinia. Unfortunately Madame Clothilde, whilst extremely amiable, had already developed the Bourbon tendency to embonpoint—which had characterized her father, the late Dauphin—and was known at Court as 'Gros Madame.' This at first proved an insuperable objection, Victor Amédée III frankly declared that the embonpoint of Madame Clothilde appalled him, and gave as his reason that fat women were often sterile, that French women after living in Italy were inclined to grow still fatter, and that the Prince de Piedmont preferred thin women.<sup>1</sup> His first concern, he said, was to marry off his daughters, and one to the heir to the throne of France, who at that date was the Duc de Bourgogne. The death of this prince and the marriage of the new Dauphin, later Louis XVI, to an Austrian princess put a momentary end to these negotiations, and in the end Victor Amédée had to content himself with the Comtes de Provence and d'Artois as sons-in-law.

<sup>1</sup> Flammermont, *Correspondances Diplomatiques*, p. 311.



This was really as much as he could expect, for both his daughters were extremely unattractive. When in May 1771 Marie Josèphe de Savoie arrived in France for her marriage to the Comte de Provence, Louis XV admitted that he thought her very ugly, and the public agreed with his opinion. The Comte de Provence himself was not long in taking a dislike to her. This total want of charm filled her with a sullen jealousy of Marie Antoinette, though she was careful not to show it too openly. 'Mme la Comtesse de Provence,' writes Mercy, 'endeavours to mask herself in front of the Dauphine who is not easily taken in by such appearances, though her candour, frankness and excellent character make her unsuspicious of other people.'

Marie Thérèse de Savoie, who was married to the Comte d'Artois in December 1773, was even more awkward and ungraceful than the Comtesse de Provence. Small, badly made, with a large mouth, ill-set eyes and irregular features, she was remarkable for nothing but the extraordinary length of her nose. Less adroit than her sister, the Comtesse d'Artois made herself frankly disagreeable to the Dauphine, who, from the beginning, showed her nothing but kindness and continued to show it in spite of her ill-humour.

It is soon after the marriage of the Comte d'Artois that we read for the first time of Marie Antoinette going to a masked ball at the Opera, a proceeding to which Mercy takes no exception, for these balls were not in the least disreputable and were attended by the best society; moreover, since she went with her husband, his brothers and their wives, nothing could be more correct. Thus in February 1774 Mercy writes:

'The three Princes and Princesses came on the 30th of January to the masked ball at the Opera; measures had been so well taken that they remained a long while without being recognized by anyone. M. le Dauphin behaved splendidly; he went about the ball talking indiscriminately to all those he met on his path, in a very gay and decorous manner introducing the kind of jests suited to the occasion. The public was enchanted with this conduct on the part of

M. le Dauphin, it made a great sensation in Paris and they did not fail, as always happens in these cases, to attribute to Mme la Dauphine the improvement they noticed in her consort's way of showing himself. Mme la Comtesse d'Artois appeared on this occasion, as on others, very indifferent, taciturn and bored. This attitude gives such displeasure here that they criticized her much too freely. . . .

'The Princes and Princesses came back a second time to the Opera ball on Sunday, the 6th of this month; but this time their presence was less well concealed and consequently there was a much greater influx of people to the theatre. However nothing improper or embarrassing resulted, and Mme la Dauphine, who did not unmask, drew on herself all the applause and admiration with which the public always hastens to do homage to her, both owing to her choice of the people to whom she spoke and the things she said to them.' <sup>1</sup>

Maria Theresa saw nothing to object to in Mercy's account of these evenings. 'I am very glad,' she wrote, 'that the recent carnival was so successful.' <sup>2</sup>

Amongst the people to whom Marie Antoinette talked at the first of the two balls, on January 30, was a young Swede who had arrived in France a few weeks earlier.

Comte Axel de Fersen, the son of the Field-Marshal Friedrich Axel de Fersen, was born in 1755, and at the age of fifteen was sent by his father on a tour of Europe which lasted four years. The journey ended in Paris on November 15, 1773, and four days later he was presented at the Court of France. Between that date and January 17, 1774, he attended four of the Dauphine's balls, so they were already acquainted when they met at the Opera ball on the 30th of the same month. 'Madame la Dauphine,' Fersen wrote in his private Journal, 'talked to me for a long while without my recognizing her; when at last she made herself known everyone crowded round her, so she retired into a box.' <sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, II 108

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, II 114

<sup>3</sup> Klinckowstrom, *Le Comte de Fersen*, I p. xvi.

A more innocent adventure cannot be imagined; the girl of eighteen thought it very amusing to talk to this boy of her own age from behind her mask and enjoy his astonishment at finding he had been talking to the Dauphine. It was only the game of mystification which makes the fun of a masked ball, and which when the unknown one turns out to be a royal personage becomes all the more piquant.

But Marie Antoinette's social successes were not calculated to endear her to her sisters-in-law, who could not compete with her gaiety and ready wit. By degrees these two, added to the maiden aunts, came to form a coalition of women all secretly hostile to the young Dauphine. It was certainly no pleasant family party that her lot had been cast.

Meanwhile the Court was divided into warring factions, represented in 1770 by the party of the Duc d'Aiguillon supported by Mme du Barry and that of the Duc de Choiseul who had furthered the Franco-Austrian alliance of 1756 and negotiated the marriage of the Dauphine. Though small, plain and sandy-haired, Choiseul's charm and wit, together with his elegance of manners, had made him universally popular in the salons and amongst men of letters. 'Never,' said the Baron de Gleichen, 'have I known any man who was able to shed joy and contentment around him in the way he did.'

It was natural that Marie Antoinette, always drawn to the happy side of life, should have been attracted to Choiseul, but beyond mere attraction lay deep gratitude to the man who had shown himself the friend of her people and made her Dauphine of France. Mme Campan declares that Choiseul and his party were in fact her only friends.

But Choiseul had further antagonized the opposing party by his suppression in 1762 of the Jesuits, who were suspected in some quarters of complicity in the attempt made by Damiens on the life of Louis XV. Choiseul's action was deeply resented by the Duc d'Aiguillon's party, which, whilst caring little enough for religion, came to be known on that account as the 'party of the devout.' To this faction be-

longed the Chancellor Maupeou, the Comtesse de Marsan, gouvernante of the 'enfants de France' (the Dauphin's young sisters Clothilde and Elizabeth), the Rohans, and the Dauphin's former governor, the Duc de la Vauguyon.

From the beginning Marie Antoinette frankly detested the Duc de la Vauguyon, not only because he belonged to the anti-Austrian party, but because she held him responsible for the Dauphin's faults of education. Soon after her arrival in France, on June 15, 1770, Mercy describes to Maria Theresa an interview he has just had with the Dauphine: 'Her Royal Highness told me she was pleased with the Dauphin, that she attributed his timidity and coldness to the kind of education he had received, but that apart from this he seemed to have a good disposition, that she was quite convinced that he held to the Duc de la Vauguyon from habit and from fear, but in no way from confidence or affection, and that the prince was so reserved on the subject that in spite of several little attempts, she had never been able to get a word out of him to clear up her doubts.'

A few weeks later her opinion of the Duke was triumphantly vindicated by an amusing incident that she relates to her mother:

'As to my dear husband,' she writes on July 9, 1770, 'he has changed a great deal and all to his advantage. He is very friendly with me and begins to show confidence. He certainly does not like M. de la Vauguyon, but he is afraid of him. The other day a curious thing happened. I was alone with my husband when M. de la Vauguyon comes hastily to the door to listen. A footman who is either a fool or a very honest man, opens the door and M. le Duc is found planted there like a pikestaff, unable to retreat. Then I pointed out to my husband the inconvenience of allowing people to listen at doors, and he took it very well.'<sup>1</sup> This child of fourteen was certainly no fool.

Unhappily for Marie Antoinette the anti-Choiseul party triumphed, and the Duke, who had rendered real services to

<sup>1</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, i. 17

France by his efforts to reform the army and navy, had saved the State twenty millions a year in foreign subsidies, and had formed the celebrated *Pacte de Famille* with a view to uniting all the Bourbon sovereigns against the growing sea-power of England, was now accused of wasting vast sums on colonizing in Guiana and of militarist views tending to draw France into another war. But the real cause of his fall was the antagonism of the Chancellor Maupeou, the Abbé Terray, Comptroller General of Finances, and the Duc d'Aiguillon, all devoted to the du Barry, whom Choiseul had offended. Some of this faction, notably the Comtesse de Marsan, went so far as to bring against him the preposterous accusation of having poisoned the late Dauphin, and of wishing to attempt the life of the present one. Louis XV, roused to resentment by the continued insinuations of the faction and the persuasions of the favourite, finally yielded, and Choiseul received the following *lettre de cachet*:

‘My cousin, the displeasure which your services cause me oblige me to exile you to Chanteloup [the Duke’s country house] where you will betake yourself in twenty-four hours. I should have sent you much further if it had not been for the particular esteem in which I hold Mme la Duchesse de Choiseul whose health is of great concern to me. Take care that your conduct does not make me adopt another course. Whereupon I pray God, my cousin, that He may have you in His holy keeping.—Louis.’

The salons took up this missive in a satire attributed in some quarters to the Chevalier de Boufflers:

‘Ne venez pas ici, mon cousin,  
C’est mon ordre suprême,  
Et dites à mes autres cousins  
Qu’ils en fassent de même, mon cousin,  
Sur ce je prie Dieu qu’il vous ait, mon cousin,  
En sa sainte et digne garde’

The exile of the Duc de Choiseul was a heavy blow to Marie Antoinette and a brilliant triumph for her enemies.

Deprived of her strongest supporter she found herself more than ever isolated, but her buoyant nature carried her through, and even Mercy is obliged to admit during those years of 1770 to 1774 she made no mistakes of consequence. The old Prince de Kaunitz, writing in 1771, declared that 'she steers her bark with wisdom over the stormy sea.'<sup>1</sup>

A stormy sea indeed, a sea of rivalries, of jealousies, and as Maria Theresa said, of truly 'diabolical intrigues' which, kept in abeyance till the death of Louis XV, were now to burst their bonds and spend their fury on the head of the young Queen.

<sup>1</sup> *Mercy et Joseph II*, II 390

## CHAPTER II

### LOUIS LE DÉSIÉ

THE old King, feeling his end approaching, had dismissed Mme du Barry as a preliminary to the *amende honorable* he made to his people expressing his repentance at the scandal he had caused by his manner of life. Summoning the favourite to his bedside, he assured her of his friendship and ordered her to leave for Rueil, the estate of the Duc d'Aiguillon. So in the afternoon of May 5, 1774, Mme du Barry, hurriedly reft from her gilded attics above the King's apartments, was driven away by the Duchesse d'Aiguillon to the Duke's country house, en route for the convent of Pont-aux-Dames, to which she was exiled before finally retiring to her house at Louveciennes.

Immediately Louis XV had breathed his last everyone else fled from the plague-stricken palace, for the confluent smallpox from which he died was of so virulent a kind that fifty people caught the infection by passing through the Galerie des Glaces and ten died as a result. Accordingly, at four o'clock on the same fateful day, May the 10th, the whole Court set forth for Choisy, the three aunts, released from their long vigil at their father's bedside, being included in the party. As they were highly infectious it was arranged that they should occupy a separate house at Choisy, but this did not damp their ardour and Mme Adélaïde started at once to try and dominate the new King.

Louis XVI was the more susceptible to this influence since he was crushed by his grandfather's death and the responsibility thrown on his shoulders. Mme Campan's account of the despair that seized the young King and Queen at finding themselves called to the throne finds confirmation in the

dispatches of Lord Stormont,<sup>1</sup> British ambassador to the Court of France, which are preserved in the Record Office <sup>2</sup> and, although of considerable interest, appear never to have been published.

On May 11, 1774, the day after the death of Louis XV, Stormont writes:

‘They [the royal family] are under inexpressible affliction and none more so than the King and Queen, who all along expressed the greatest anxiety for their Grandfather’s recovery, and the utmost apprehension of the load which his death would throw upon them and which their youth and inexperience made them so little able to bear. One of the Dauphin’s expressions was “Il me semble que l’Univers va tomber sur moi.”’

Weighed down by the feeling of his incapacity Louis XVI’s first thought was to seek the advice of a man older and, he believed, wiser than himself. Such a man was Machault, who had occupied the post of Comptroller General of Finances in 1745, but had been disgraced by the intrigues of Mme de Pompadour. The letter summoning him to Choisy was already written when Mme Adélaïde, at the instigation of her lady-in-waiting, the intriguing Comtesse de Narbonne, persuaded her nephew to send instead for the Comte de Maurepas, now seventy-three years old, who at the age of twenty-four had controlled the Admiralty as well as the King’s household, and had been exiled twenty-five years earlier for lampooning the same all-powerful favourite.

The letter now addressed to Maurepas on May 12, 1770, shows vividly the trouble of the young King’s soul:

‘Amidst the natural grief that overwhelms me and that I share with the whole kingdom, I have great duties to fulfil. I am King; the word comprises many obligations. But alas! I am only twenty [he was not twenty till three months later] and I have not the knowledge necessary. I have been unable to work with the Ministers as they have

<sup>1</sup> David Murray, 1st Baron Stormont (1727-1796)

<sup>2</sup> Under S P 78 293-296.



all seen the King during his illness. [And were isolated on account of the infection.] My certainty of your rectitude and of your profound knowledge of affairs impels me to ask you to help me with your counsels. Come then as soon as possible and you will give me pleasure.'

This invitation, destined as we shall see later to prove fatal, was made in ignorance but in all good faith. No king has ever ascended a throne with a more sincere desire to do right than the unfortunate Louis XVI. The impression he made at this crisis on the dispassionate mind of the Scotsman who filled the post of British ambassador must be given in full. In a 'most confidential' letter to Lord Rochford, dated May 18, Lord Stormont writes:

'I must begin with saying that according to all the information I have been able to gather from different quarters, His Most Christian Majesty did by no means show an arbitrary disposition to hold councils during the late King's illness, or betray the least impatience to reign, but on the contrary, as I observed to your Lordship in a former dispatch, shewed great anxiety for his grandfather's recovery and a real apprehension of being raised so early to the throne. His letter to Mr de Maurepas and the language he has constantly held since his grandfather's death, strongly indicate the same sentiments. He speaks of his inability, inexperience and total ignorance in a manner which, in my opinion, does him honour, and gives room to hope that he will endeavour to learn, as the first step to knowledge is to feel the want of it. The number of letters which he has wrote with his own hand to the Princes of the Blood and to his several Ministers, shew that he is capable of application; the style of those letters, and the clear precise manner in which he answered the questions put to him by his Ministers, indicate an aptitude to business, and tho' those questions were not very material, carry marks of a good, plain, natural understanding.'

At the same time Lord Stormont observes that 'he is naturally of a warm violent temper, impatient of controul

and kindling into anger on the slightest provocation,' which gives the ambassador some uneasiness as to the relations between France and England. 'With this disposition he may be but too apt to take fire on the least dispute that may arise between us and may draw the sword with the confidence that is natural to youth,' etc.

But Louis was too much occupied with the task of cleansing the Augean stable of the Court to think of war at this moment. It is curious to find the Queen of eighteen writing about him in almost exactly the same terms as the middle-aged Scotsman. In a letter to her mother on May 14, Marie Antoinette says:

'The new King seems to have the good of his people at heart; two days before the grandfather's death he had two hundred thousand francs distributed to the poor which made a great impression. Since that death he has not ceased to work and reply with his own hand to the Ministers he has not been able to see, and to many other letters. What is certain is that he has a taste for economy and the greatest desire to make his people happy. In everything he has as much desire as need to learn, and I trust that God will bless his good will. The public expected great changes all in a moment; the King contented himself with sending the creature<sup>1</sup> to a convent, and driving from the Court everything that bears the name of scandal.'

Four days later Lord Stormont wrote: 'He [the King] has more than once spoke with concern of the general licentiousness and dissoluteness that reigns here, and has had conversations on the subject with Mr. de Maurepas and Mr. de Sartine. He asked the latter what people thought of him at Paris, what was the general expectation and was much pleased with Mr. de Sartine's answer, which was: "It is expected, Sire, that the reign of your Majesty will be that of justice, probity and good morals."

'He consulted Mr. de Maurepas upon the best manner of correcting the morals of this people and restoring them to a

<sup>1</sup> Mme du Barry

due sense of virtue and religion. Mr. de Maurepas made him a very proper answer: "There is but one way, Sire, and it is one your Majesty will certainly take, to show them a good example. In all countries, but particularly in this, where the Sovereign leads the people follow. All coercive measures in things of this nature are ineffectual, they always miss their aim and often defeat the very end they propose."

'This prudent advice was the more seasonable as there is reason to suspect that their present Majesties are both desirous of introducing such regulations about kept mistresses etc., as the Empress Queen has attempted with little success and as are still less calculated for this meridian, than for that of Vienna.'

The King's first thought was to cut down his personal expenditure. On the 20th of May, La Ferté, an important dignitary of the Court, came before him to ask for orders, explaining that he was the comptroller of the King's 'Menus Plaisirs,' that is to say, of the department devoted to his minor amusements—not those of the chase. Louis replied: 'My Menus Plaisirs are to walk about in the park. I do not need you.' And he brusquely turned his back on the astonished official. Louis now declared his intention of saving the sums incurred by the custom known as the 'joyous accession' which had hitherto celebrated a new reign. 'There are expenses,' he said in the first edict of his reign, 'necessary to the safety of the State,' but there are those 'attaching to our person and the pomp of our Court; in the matter of these we can more promptly follow the impulse of our heart.'

At the same time Marie Antoinette renounced what was known as the 'droit de ceinture,' another ancient usage by which a sum was levied for the Queen's purse which hung upon her girdle, saying she had no need of this since 'girdles are no longer worn.'

This *bon mot* delighted the public, which went mad over its new sovereigns. On the pedestal of the statue of Henri IV on the Pont Neuf was found written: 'Resurrexit.' Every-

where the portrait of the new King was seen between those of Louis XII and Henri IV, with the words 'Twelve and four make sixteen.' Louis was proclaimed 'Louis le Désiré.' Never had the reign of a King of France opened with such a delirium of joy and loyalty.

The Court now left Choisy and spent a few days at the little château de la Muette in the Bois de Boulogne. From morn till eve a cheering crowd surrounded the railings, the cries of 'Vive le Roi' beginning as early as six o'clock in the morning. The gates of the Bois de Boulogne, usually closed, were opened by order of the King, and the royal family walked or rode out daily, 'surrounded,' says the Comte de Creutz, 'by all the people of Paris.' One day the Queen, 'lovely as the day and full of grace,' arrived on horseback and, seeing the King approaching from another direction on foot alone amongst the crowd, dismounted, whereat the King hastened towards her and kissed her on the forehead. The clapping of hands that greeted this action emboldened him to give her 'two good kisses' amidst redoubled applause.

Marie Antoinette, having recovered from her first terror at finding herself Queen, felt all her courage revive at these acclamations, and Maria Theresa, who had thought her daughter's happy days ended, now wrote on May 30, full of hope: 'the prospect is great and beautiful. . . . I flatter myself to see the reign of Louis Auguste happy and glorious.'

And again on June 16: 'I cannot express my joy and consolation at all I hear of you; the whole universe is in ecstasy. There is good cause for it: a king of twenty and a queen of nineteen [they had neither yet quite attained these ages]; all their actions full of humanity, generosity, prudence and the greatest judgement. Religion and morals, so necessary in order to draw down the blessing of God and to keep a hold on the people, are not forgotten, in a word my heart is full of joy and I pray God He may preserve you for the good of your people, for the universe, for your family and for your old mother to whom you give new life! . . . How I love the French at this moment! What resources

there are in a nation that feels so vividly! One need only wish them more constancy and less frivolity; by correcting their morals that will change too.'

Marie Antoinette was also afraid of the people's tendency to transient emotions. 'It is quite true,' she writes to her mother, 'that the King's praises have sounded everywhere. He well deserves it for the rectitude of his soul and his desire to do well, but I am rather anxious at this French enthusiasm in the future. The little I hear of public affairs makes me see that some of them are very difficult and perplexing. It is generally agreed that the late King left things in a very bad state; opinions are divided and it will be impossible to content everyone in a country where their vivacity makes them wish that everything should be done in a minute.'

Lord Stormont had formed precisely the same opinion of the French character. In his dispatch of May 18, already quoted, he had observed:

'The levity of this nation makes them catch greedily at these appearances and carry them much beyond the truth. You now hear from almost every mouth the highest encomiums of those talents, which a few weeks ago, were universally placed upon the lowest level. The strongest and most decided feature in this King's character are a love of justice, a general desire of doing well, a passion for œconomy and an abhorrence of all the excesses of the last reign. He heard much whilst he was Dauphin of the consequences of those excesses, particularly of that general profusion and extravagance that was so visible in every department, particularly in the King's household; is strongly bent upon correcting those abuses and sets about it, with the eager impatience of a parsimonious son who succeeds to a prodigal father. He is eternally repeating the word œconomy, œconomy, and begins already to enter into the minutest details. Whether he will embrace such a large and liberal plan of œconomy as suits a great nation like this or suffer this wise principle to waste itself in an attention to little pauperly domestic savings, time will show; at any rate this

disposition will be of some service to this country and restore some part of its strength by stopping a number of drains. . . .'

Marie Antoinette readily seconded the King in his efforts to economize. Although enchanted at the gift of the Petit Trianon, which he offered her in accordance with the time-honoured custom of presenting the Queen with a country house on her accession to the throne, she steadily refused to be led into making requests to the King for money to meet the increased demands on her purse, though, as we shall see, her personal allowance was increased later through the intervention of Mercy. Maria Theresa, whilst cautioning her on this point, sees less reason for anxiety in any tendency to extravagance than in her continued want of application to serious things. The correspondence with Mercy still harps on this one theme. The Queen, with all the influence she exercises over the King's mind, refuses to use that influence in the interests of affairs of State. She continues to ride, to play the harp and harpsichord, to watch the making of an English garden at the Petit Trianon, to charm all beholders by her youth and gaiety, but still she will not read and, above all, will not be drawn into discussions on the political situation. In vain Mercy represents to her that her whole happiness, present and future, depends on her knowing how to use 'the brilliant position in which Providence has placed her' by 'meditation, by occupying herself with serious matters and the knowledge necessary to deal with them,' whilst Maria Theresa in almost every letter speaks of her '*insouciance*' and '*dissipation*.' To these lecturings Marie Antoinette frankly replies: 'I must admit my fondness for "*dissipation*" and my aversion to serious things. I desire and hope to correct myself by degrees and without ever mixing myself up in intrigues, to make myself worthy of the confidence of the King, who always lives on terms of good friendship with me.'<sup>1</sup>

But she saw better than Mercy or Maria Theresa the

<sup>1</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, II 207

necessity for avoiding any appearance of interfering in public affairs. For Louis XVI, with all his affection for his wife and respect for her intelligence, had a great dread of women's influence. 'They taught me nothing,' he once said in speaking of his education, 'but I have read a little history and learnt that it is mistresses and lawful wives who have always ruined states.'

This conviction, in the opinion of Marie Antoinette, had been strengthened by his governor. 'Since before my marriage,' she wrote to her brother Joseph II in 1784, 'the Duc de la Vauguyon has frightened him about the power his wife would wish to exercise over him,' and she describes the difficulty of discussing anything with him. 'He is by nature not talkative and he often happens not to speak to me of important affairs even though he has no wish to hide them from me.'<sup>1</sup>

It is easy, therefore, to imagine how the young Queen after her accession, urged by Mercy and her mother on one hand to use her influence with the King, and on the other finding him reserved and unforthcoming, ended by adopting the pleasant path of keeping to her rôle as a woman and allowing herself to be drawn gradually into the pleasures of the hour.

Lord Stormont confirms her description of the King's attitude in a dispatch of May 25, 1774:

'The King seems to have a great dislike to advice he does not ask, and to be very unwilling to be governed or to have the appearance of being so. Whether this comes from a mind that feels its own strength or from one that wishes to conceal its weakness a little time will show.'

The ambassador goes on to observe that 'this will render the part the Queen has to play a little difficult.' He 'treats her with great regard and fondness . . . but does not let her meddle with business.' It is therefore not surprising that, as Lord Stormont relates in a subsequent dispatch, 'the Queen continues to disassociate herself from politics' and 'seems to think of nothing but making herself universally

<sup>1</sup> *Lettres de Marie Antoinette*, II 43

beloved by the most gracious and engaging manner. In that respect she will rival her mother.'

The King's dread of allowing himself to yield to his natural confidence in Marie Antoinette—of which Mercy speaks again and again in his letters—was further increased by the continued insinuations of Mme Adélaïde. During a few weeks, however, her activities were curtailed by the small-pox, for the poor old Princesses were destined to pay the price of their devotion, and all contracted it.

Marie Antoinette had already had the disease, but the King, his brothers and the Comtesse d'Artois now submitted to the new treatment of inoculation with serum from a mild case of smallpox; the modern vaccine taken from cow-pox was not discovered till some twenty years later by Jenner. The process, carried out by four small incisions, resulted in a correspondingly mild attack accompanied by fever and pustules on various parts of the body, during which period the patient was considered infectious. The King therefore, says Lord Stormont, 'gave orders no-one was to attend him who had not had smallpox and has had the humanity to extend this order to his lowest servants.' His decision to undergo inoculation, Lord Stormont further states, 'is attributed to the Queen's influence and has brought forth many protests, . . . but what is now treated as unpardonable temerity will, I hope, next week be exalted as the height of wisdom.'

Marie Antoinette followed the process with the keenest interest. The King, she writes to her mother, 'has not many spots but he has very remarkable ones on his nose, wrist and chest which begin to whiten'

The aunts' illness had filled her with concern: 'They have just come to forbid me to go to my aunt Adélaïde who has high fever and pain in the back; they fear smallpox. I shudder and dare not think of the consequences; it is dreadful for her to pay so quickly for the sacrifice she made.'

It was characteristic of Marie Antoinette that she never expressed the smallest rancour towards her personal enemies;



there were people she detested for their character, but never for having done her an injury. Her own candour and goodness of heart were such that, as Mercy said, she did not suspect people of wishing to injure her, she did not realize that they were enemies until the fact was forced on her. Even then, to the end of her life she would not return evil for evil by reviling them.

But jealousy is cruel as the grave, and Mme Adélaïde's hatred, born of jealousy, was unappeasable. Although she had made use of Marie Antoinette to secure the appointment of Maurepas, she now wrote to the King 'in concert with the Prince de Condé warning him against "suffering himself to be too much influenced by the Queen."'

Lord Stormont, after relating this bit of news on June 8, refers in a further dispatch of the 15th to the renewed struggle between the rival factions of the Choiseulistes and the Duc d'Aiguillon's party. The enemies of Choiseul will not quit the field. 'Their weight will soon be increased by Mme Adélaïde's return to Court, as it cannot be doubted that in this and every other point, she will labour to diminish the Queen's credit without however openly attacking it. If it once appears that the Court of Vienna attempts by the Queen's means to govern the councils of this Court there is no doubt that all the enemies of the Queen's credit, Mme Adélaïde at their head, will try to avail themselves of that circumstance and make the King believe that whilst he listens to her he will only be a Vice Roi to the Empress Queen. There is no handle they can take that will be better than this. The young King has a great dread of being governed and would, as is most just, be particularly shocked at the idea of being governed by a foreign power. Count Mercy avoids all appearance of business with the Queen and as I imagine makes use of the channel of Abbé Vermond who is in some favour with the Queen, but as I am told is rather displeasing to His Most Christian Majesty.'

In a dispatch written just before the death of Louis XV Lord Stormont had observed that 'the cabals and intrigues

at Versailles are, as I am assured, beyond all description or belief,' and now, on June 15, he goes on to say that the King 'is entangled in cabal and intrigue and has no clue to guide him through the maze.' He will, Lord Stormont had written a fortnight earlier, 'be guided by events as they arise, will decide from the inclination and opinion of the moment and perhaps may have his inclination warped and his opinion led by the force of those secret engines that are playing all around him and that are directed by very able hands.'

As to the character of Marie Antoinette at this moment, Stormont shows himself much in accord with Mercy :

'The Queen,' he writes on June 8, 'has great quickness and vivacity and infinite grace and address, but as I am told totally wants application and that steadiness of pursuit which by little and little forces its way, and therefore her credit and influence will probably not be constant but show itself by starts, and not tend to any one determined point.'

Again on June 22 Stormont writes :

'Notwithstanding all her present influence it is very possible that her credit may not last long. There are many people constantly at watch to undermine it in secret, and every opportunity will be seized to work upon the King's natural suspicion. She already begins to show her power and lets her passions play.'

This whilst Mercy and Maria Theresa are complaining that she is not making sufficient use of her influence over the King !

But Lord Stormont realizes the difficulties by which she is confronted. 'At the same time,' he goes on to say, 'snares are spreading under her feet and every secret attempt is making to lessen her influence.'

Already spiteful tongues had begun to misrepresent her actions. At the reception given after the death of Louis XV at La Muette, it was said that she had laughed in the face of some of the solemn dowagers who had come to pay their visits of condolence. Mme Campan explains that what

really happened was that one of her ladies-in-waiting, the young Marquise de Clermont-Tonnerre, tired with the long ceremony during which she was obliged to stand behind the Queen, sat down at last on the parquet and amused herself by peeping out between the panniers of Marie Antoinette and her ladies and playing childish tricks to make them laugh. The Queen, who had shown great dignity and respect for the conventions till this moment, could not repress a smile, which she quickly concealed behind her fan, but the mischief was done, and next day a song went round with the refrain :

‘Petite reine de vingt ans,  
Vous, qui traitez si mal les gens,  
Vous repasserez la barrière  
Laire, laire, laire lanlaire, laire lanla ’

Marie Antoinette’s worst foes were those of her own household. The spiteful aunts and the jealous sisters-in-law left to themselves might have been powerless to harm her ; unfortunately they had the ear of men whose official position offered facilities for circulating every malicious rumour.

For at this Court of Versailles each Power of Europe had its ‘eye,’ an ambassador who made it his business to collect gossip and pass it on to his royal master. Not every ‘eye’ was as dispassionate in its vision as that of England or as respectfully severe as that of Austria, and compared with Stormont’s and Mercy’s restrained dispatches those of other ambassadors appear absolutely shocking. Descending to the lowest forms of espionage they pry into the private life of the King and Queen, question maids and valets and write with the grossest indecency about all they have been able to discover. But whilst the Spanish ambassador Aranda, the most shameless in this respect, writes without malice, the representatives of Prussia and Sardinia seize upon every story they can get hold of to the detriment of Marie Antoinette.

The two Piedmontais princesses—the Comtesses de Provence and d’Artois—are thus provided with a publicity agent in the person of the Sardinian ambassador, into whose ear

they can pour all their venom against their hated sister-in-law, and the Comtesse de Provence makes good use of this channel of communication. The dispatches of the Comte de Viry, then of the Comte de Scarnafis, bear in every line the evidence of her inspiration, and invidious comparisons are drawn between her wisdom and prudence and the '*légèreté*' of Marie Antoinette. If only *she* were in the Queen's place what wise counsels she would be able to give the King! And de Viry goes so far as to declare that this plain stupid woman, in whom the Parisiens never took the slightest interest, has now become 'the idol of the nation.'<sup>1</sup> The salon of the Comtesse de Provence like that of Mme Adélaïde thus became a laboratory for all the libels poured out through official dispatches, through scurrilous *on dits* and ribald verses that were to smirch the character of Marie Antoinette.

So in this house divided against itself the monarchy was hastening to its ruin

'Upon the whole, my Lord,' Stormont ends his dispatch of June 22, 1774, by saying, 'this I may venture to assure your Lordship—whatever may be said, and I think with great truth, of the purity of the King's intentions, whatever dreams the levity of this country may form of halcyon days and a golden reign, every instrument of faction, every Court engine is constantly at work, and the whole is such a scene of jealousy, cabal and intrigue that no enemy need wish it more.'

<sup>1</sup> Flammermont, *Correspondances Diplomatiques*, pp 322, 330

### CHAPTER III

#### FRANCE IN 1774

It is now time to consider the situation outside the Court which Louis XVI was called upon to face on his accession to the throne. Mercy attributes the frightful decadence of France at this moment to the reign of the du Barry, whom, like Marie Antoinette, he speaks of as a 'creature,' but who, though of even lower origin than her predecessor Mme de Pompadour, was the better woman of the two. It is true that with no pretensions to intellect she had contributed nothing to art, but on the other hand she had not consciously made her salon a centre of seditious intrigue, she had put down the Parc aux Cerfs where young girls, almost children, had been made to serve the pleasures of the King, and had shown evidence of that good heart which made her later the Lady Bountiful of Louveciennes and the loyal subject of the King and Queen in the troubled days to come. It was less then the du Barry herself than her entourage which, as Mercy shows, had brought about the degradation of France.

These influences radiating from the Court had made themselves felt all over the country. The finances were ruined, every government department was in debt, the deficit stood at over seventy-eight million livres, whilst annual expenditure exceeded revenues by twenty-two million. Commerce was languishing; investors trembled for their securities.<sup>1</sup>

Disorder of finance went back, however, far beyond the reign of the du Barry: its origin may be traced to the wars of Louis XIV and to the operations of the Scotsman, John

<sup>1</sup> *Examen Impartial de la Vie de Louis XVI*, p. 43

Law, who under the Regent had set up a vast system of inflation and ruined countless people. Further wars during the eighteenth century aggravated the situation which Choiseul had vainly endeavoured to relieve; the reckless expenditure of the Court and the mistresses of Louis XV had thus only added the last straw to the back of that overloaded camel—the taxpayer of France.

The whole system of finance, compared with that of England or Holland at the same date, was fundamentally bad. Taxes were not collected by government officials but by the agents of financiers known as Farmers General, instituted in the time of Law, who worked hand in glove with bankers, stockjobbers and other speculators. The taxpayer was thus confronted by the agents of formidable bodies over which the Government had little control.

Meanwhile the army was disheartened by the humiliating end of the Seven Years' War, which, beginning as a European conflict, had developed into a trial of strength between France and England. By the Treaty of Paris in 1763 France had been obliged to surrender to England her possessions in Canada and nearly all of those in India. At the same time her navy was reduced to nothing. The French troops which, from the victory of Rocroi in 1642 to the defeat of Blenheim in 1704, ranked as the best in the world, had throughout the eighteenth century suffered a series of reverses; during the reign of Louis XV at Rossbach (1757), Crefeld (1758) and finally Quebec. For these the victories of Fontenoy (1745), Raucoux (1746) and Lauffeld (1747), under the Maréchal de Saxe, did not entirely atone in the popular estimation. Since the Marquis de Villars under Louis XIV, France had produced no great general, the Maréchal de Saxe was a German. The declining prestige of the French army was attributed by the nation to the monarch and his Ministers. The kings of France had ceased to lead their armies into battle; even at Fontenoy, Louis XV had been present only as a spectator and an inspiration to the flagging troops. To a people steeped in the traditions of Charlemagne

and Henri IV, of the Crusades and the wars with England and the Hapsburgs, the reign of civilian kings came as an anticlimax. In contrast, Frederick the Great, victor of Rossbach, became, even in French eyes, as M. Jacques Bainville observes, 'the type of an enlightened sovereign.'

The administration of justice was still archaic. No Habeas Corpus Act existed; arbitrary imprisonment for the lower classes and *lettres de cachet* for the higher took the place of trial by jury or by impartial judges. Brutal punishments were still employed; it was left to Louis XVI to abolish torture.

Besides the ills that afflicted all sections of the community were those peculiar to the various bodies in the State. Let us consider as briefly as possible the conditions and the grievances of each in turn

The peasants were, of course, the chief sufferers. Taine's vast and impartial researches have revealed in detail the misery in which they lived under Louis XV. This misery was periodic, varying in degree according to good or bad harvests. Under previous reigns the production of grain and distribution of food supplies had been the principal care of the King and his Ministers<sup>1</sup>. But this was complicated by inadequate means of transport which were needed in order to carry supplies from those districts where there was corn in abundance to those where the harvest had failed. The difficulty of this was immense in the old days when instead of railways and steam-boats there were only roads, far fewer than to-day and less well kept up, and for conveyances heavy ill-made wagons, or canals with sailing-boats depending on the winds. And instead of posts, telegraphs and telephones, there were only couriers as a means of communication in case of need. The situation was much the same as in India before the British took control of the distribution of corn, when Bengal might be revelling in plenty whilst there was famine in the Punjab. And just as in India

<sup>1</sup> Gustave Bord, 'Le Pacte de Famine' in the *Revue de la Révolution*, II, 325 and 439 (1883)

the *bunnias* took advantage of a scarcity to buy up supplies of grain and sit on them whilst waiting for higher prices, so in old France there had always been *accapareurs*, or monopolizers, who created fictitious famines by their manoeuvres. These scourges of the countryside dated back to the time of Charlemagne when, playing on the credulity of the peasants, they accounted for the scarcity of grain by telling them that the harvest had been devoured by demons, and to fortify this belief made horrible howlings round the villages at night.

The task of tracking down speculators, of forcing them to give up supplies and of inflicting on them severe punishments when caught, had been one of the principal pre-occupations of the kings and their agents in the provinces. Before the thirteenth century, edicts were passed forcing cultivators not to hoard but to sell their grain at the current price and keep only what was necessary for their families. Measures of the same kind were taken by Philippe le Bel.

Under Charles IX a new system was devised, and by edict of February 4, 1567, magistrates were ordered to make purchases of grain and store it in public granaries for a time of need. This plan was continued until the reign of Louis XIV, when still greater activity was displayed both against famine and monopolizers by the King and his Ministers. The necessity of supplementing these stores by supplies from abroad led to the creation of a sort of bureau called 'Administration of the King's corn' (*Administration des blés du Roi*), a purely charitable institution, not intended to bring revenues to the State, but on the contrary to relieve the poor at the expense of the State. The King's granaries indeed produced such excellent results that they came to be established all over the country, and M. Bord quotes a contemporary, Philip Miller, who wrote on methods employed in England to avert famine, as saying in his *Gardener's Dictionary*: 'The French, wiser than we are in this respect, have constructed public granaries for storing corn in most of their provinces.' Besides this, bread was made from the



corn 'acheptez des deniers de sa Majesté' (bought with the King's money), and distributed to the poor at two sols a pound, instead of the five sols charged by the bakers. The ovens required for baking it were constructed in the Tuileries, and the loaves were handed out daily through windows pierced all along the wall of the château. 'The care of the poor in this time of scarcity,' wrote Delamarre in his *Traité de la Police* of 1710, 'is the first and saddest duty, and it is very worthy of the compassion of the prince and of the vigilance of magistrates to give it their consideration. It is therefore with this view that public workshops are being opened to employ the able-bodied, and that the invalids and sick are received into hospitals, and that by voluntary contributions from the well-to-do alms are collected and joined to the charitable liberalities of the prince for distribution to all those families which are recognized to be in real need.'

But as the eighteenth century proceeded a different order of things came into being. 'The Government, tired of constantly occupying itself with the purchase of grain,' handed the whole administration over to a private company, which was in no sense illicit but, rightly or wrongly, ended by incurring the suspicion of speculating in grain to its own profit.<sup>1</sup> This company, to be stigmatized during the Revolution under the name of the Pacte de Famine, has been made the subject of endless controversy, the majority of writers maintaining that it was a company of authorized monopolizers enriching themselves and also Louis XV at the expense of the people, whilst M. Gustave Bord, who studied the whole question minutely, maintains that even under Louis XV it still remained a paternal system for feeding the people in times of scarcity. The Pacte de Famine, he asserts positively, never existed.

There can, however, be no doubt that under Louis XV the people had sunk to an unprecedented depth of misery. The food question was rendered more acute by the increase of population, which by the eve of the Revolution reached

<sup>1</sup> Bord, *op cit*, p 341.

twenty-five millions—a vast number compared with the ten millions of England at that date. Both the peasants and the working classes of the towns suffered from the growing disorder of finances. Although on the advent of Louis XVI half the land had passed into the hands of peasant proprietors, it barely provided them with a livelihood since they were too poor to buy the horses, ploughs and implements necessary for agriculture, or, when bad harvests destroyed their crops, the seed required to re-sow them. This extreme poverty resulted mainly from the iniquitous increase in taxation. Direct taxation, that is to say, revenues collected in the name of the King, were levied on the peasants only; the privileged classes of nobles and clergy were exempt. Even in the case of what were known as *capitations* and *vingtièmes* intended to apply to all classes, the privileged often succeeded in eluding payment by favouritism or false declarations. Besides these were a number of other charges, paid to the privileged classes. Taine calculated that out of every hundred francs of income the peasant had to pay fifty-three to the King, that is to say, in direct taxation, fourteen to his seigneur and fourteen to the clergy, and that out of the eighteen or nineteen francs left him he had to defray the *gabelle* (salt tax) and *banvin* (wine tax). This monstrous inequality of taxation was the crying grievance of the pre-revolutionary era. ‘What hurts us,’ said one of the *cahiers de doléances* in 1789, ‘is that those who have the most pay the least. We pay the *tailles* and quantities of utensils, whilst the nobles and the clergy who have the most beautiful possessions pay nothing of all that. Why should it be the rich who pay the least and the poor who pay the most? Should not everyone pay according to his means? Sire, we ask you that it should be so, because that is just.’ The same cahier had opened with expressions of loyalty to the King: ‘It is not with you we are aggrieved, so much do we love you, but with those you employ and who understand their own interests better than yours.’<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Taine, *Les Origines de la France Contemporaine. L'Ancien Régime*, II 268

In other words, it was officialdom that had become the people's bugbear, the host of functionaries—*intendants*, *huissiers*, *douaniers*, *commis* and so on, who settled on them like locusts devouring the work of their hands.

It was this more than feudalism that roused their resentment. In the old days the feudal system had worked well, but what was left of it comprised few benefits and many abuses. It is, however, an error to judge of these abuses by modern ideas instead of comparing them with those of other countries at that period. De Tocqueville declares that the same feudal rights existed everywhere in Europe during the eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> It is only in seeking a cause for the Revolution that so much attention has been paid to those of France; an enquiry into conditions then prevailing in Prussia and countries further East in Europe would undoubtedly reveal greater injustices. Even in England was not a man hanged for stealing a sheep or transported for life for helping himself to a tart at a fair?

The tyranny of the nobles over the persons of their vassals, which in the old days had accompanied many benefits—'that hand in the iron glove,' says Taine, 'which rough handles but protects them'—and of which Carlyle makes so much, had almost ceased to exist by the eighteenth century. The instance of cruelty given by Carlyle of the Seigneur Mesmay de Quincy near Vesoul who 'invited all the rustics of his neighbourhood to a banquet; blew up his château and them with gunpowder; and instantly vanished, no man yet knows whither,' was shown by the very authority which Carlyle quotes, namely the *Histoire Parlementaire* of Buchez et Roux in a further volume, to have been a pure invention. An accident caused by a firework at a popular fête given by M. de Mesmay was found to be the origin of this accusation, and the seigneur was declared innocent by a tribunal sitting during the Revolution on June 4, 1791.<sup>2</sup> The one noble convicted of real atrocities towards the people was the

<sup>1</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution* (1887), p. 43.

<sup>2</sup> Buchez et Roux, x. 203. See also *Mémoires de Bailly*, II 142.

Marquis de Sade, who lived to be honoured by the revolutionaries.

The truth is that by the end of the eighteenth century the old nobles had largely lost their power. Many of them were poor. The Marquis de Bouillé stated that at the time of the Revolution there were about 80,000 noble families in France, of which the vast majority had been recently ennobled, largely by the sale of honours under the last three kings, and that there were only about a thousand families whose origins went back to what was called '*la nuit des temps*,' that is to say, the early days of the monarchy, when titles were conferred for valour and real services to the State. Out of these thousand families only about two to three hundred were not actually in want; many were even dying of starvation. Châteaux which had once been centres of welfare for the people had fallen into ruins surrounded with untilled fields, or had passed into the hands of financiers, rich merchants, or the new nobles of whom the Prince de Ligne said: 'They can be made *grand seigneurs* but never gentlemen.'

Of those who had retained their wealth a certain number distinguished themselves for philanthropy of the most enlightened kind. The Duc de Liancourt had established a model farm on his domains and a school to teach arts and crafts to poor children, the Duc de Penthièvre and his friend the Chevalier de Florian vied with each other in seeking out cases of distress and relieving them, the Comte de Brienne had endeared himself to thirty villages, which petitioned in vain for his life under the Reign of Terror. A breath of humanitarianism had been wafted from the salons all over France, it had become the custom to think of the poor and to sympathize with their lot. On the other hand there were, as in all times and in all countries, rich people who remained sunk in selfish luxury.

The trouble with the nobles was that they had retained their rights but not their duties, and the services they once performed for the State had passed into the hands of officials.

Taine compares their position with that of the 'landed gentry' of England who, whilst owning a larger proportion of the soil than the nobles of France and wielding as great authority, nevertheless as members of Parliament, lord-lieutenants of the county, justices of the peace or officers of militia, made themselves 'visibly useful'. The French nobles, having none of these duties to perform, too often gravitated to the towns, above all to Paris, where honours and gaiety awaited them. In this they were encouraged by the ministers of Louis XV, who would write to them asking them why they preferred to stay at home instead of paying their duty to the King. This drift to Paris created the greatest evil of all, the absentee landlords who left their estates to the care of intendants. It was they and not the nobles who tyrannized over the peasants, remorselessly exacting dues to send to their masters. The crime of the seigneurs was thus not wanton cruelty but that 'insouciance' peculiar to the French nation which has often been observed at times of emergency, even as recently as the Great War.

Another factor that alienated these nobles from the peasants was that whilst the peasants were deeply attached to the soil, the nobles who flocked to Paris had no love for country life. Arthur Young pointed out that in this respect they differed from English landowners. Whilst to a French Duc or Marquis the greatest punishment was to be exiled to his domains, the English Lord asked nothing better than to remain on his estate and carry out improvements. 'One must be English or German,' comments Taine, 'to be able to spend the dull and rainy months of the year in one's castle or farm alone with rustics for company.'

This inadaptability of the French noblesse, and also of the bourgeoisie, to country life was a thing no legislation could alter. Arthur Young, riding through France on the eve of the Revolution, frequently commented on the emptiness of the roads compared with those of England. On the outskirts of Paris 'I was eagerly on the watch for that throng of carriages which near London impede the traveller. I

watched in vain; for the road, quite to the gates, is, on comparison, a perfect desert.' 'In thirty-six miles, I have met one cabriolet, half a dozen carts, and some old women with asses.' Yet if Arthur Young, exchanging his blind mare for a modern motor-car, could flash through France from end to end to-day, would he have a very different tale to tell? But for motorists the interminable poplar-lined roads are still deserted, the provincial towns and villages, except on market days, empty and dead-alive, still bear a striking contrast to the crowded streets of England, with their cheerful throngs of people in cars, on bicycles or on foot, bent on sport or business. Still to-day all the gaiety of France is concentrated in Paris and in the towns built for pleasure—Nice, Deauville, Biarritz and so on. Neither the Revolution nor its succeeding régimes have taught the French the joy of outdoor life.

Thus in the eighteenth century the countryside, deserted by its natural owners and one-time benefactors, was left mainly to impoverished nobles or parvenus with no roots in the soil and no inherited sense of duty to their dependants.

The bourgeoisie, too, had its grievances. Disliked by the peasants as belonging to the same class as the officials who oppressed them, the bourgeois found himself looked down on by the noble he had displaced. This contempt of the upper for the middle classes common to all times and all countries—not excepting our own at the present day—has never received enough attention from historians or students of social revolution. It is not as the Socialist orator makes out, that the highly born despise the humbly born, but that they look down on those a grade below them in the social scale. Taine, referring to the provincial nobles, observed that they are 'haughty with the bourgeois but good-natured with the villager. . . . Whilst they pass the leading bourgeois, their heads held high with an air of disdain, they greet the peasants with courtesies and extreme affability.'

The Abbé de Périgord having suggested to the Comtesse de Brionne that as she had lost money she might go and live

in a small provincial town, the Comtesse replied indignantly, 'A small provincial town, *fi!* *M. de Périgord, paysanne tant qu'on voudra, bourgeoise jamais!*'

And Mme Campan relates that if the Queen enquired whether a theatrical performance had been well attended, 'a duke would reply with a bow: "There was not a cat there." . . . This did not mean, as one might think, that there was an empty house, it might have been full up, but in that case it was only with financiers, honest bourgeois or provincials. The nobility, even the highest nobility, only recognized its equals.'

Does not 'society' in our country to-day say with less cause—since it no longer consists of a caste like the aristocracies of other countries—'Nobody goes there!' of a place *It* has not chosen to frequent?

This pride of place and position did more than feudal tyranny to foster the spirit of class hatred. When the Revolution broke out it was not oppressed peasants but slighted bourgeois who made the noblesse the object of their invectives. On the other hand, there was the inherent envy and wounded vanity of those who had suffered no affront. Mme Roland could never forgive the Court at which she had felt herself to be nobody, just as the ranks of Socialism to-day have been swelled by men and women who rail against society because they are not in it. The acquisition of a title has frequently proved an effectual remedy. 'In order to turn into ridicule the first bourgeois author who writes against the noblesse,' said the Prince de Ligne, 'one should make him a Baron. He would be caught and the clever man would become the proudest of Barons.'

Besides the three classes of nobles, bourgeois and peasants was a fourth section of the community which exercised an important influence in the State. This was the clergy.

In the old days the higher ranks of the Church had been filled by men chosen for high moral character, piety or erudition, and had therefore inspired the people with the deepest veneration. Still, under Louis XIV bishoprics were

sometimes conferred on men of merit not of noble birth. But under Louis XV only nobles could hope for preferment, and prelates were chosen from amongst the gay young men of the Court and provinces, some of whom, like the sporting parsons of eighteenth-century England, found their chief enjoyment in the pleasures of the chase, or left their dioceses for the glitter of Versailles. Others again, ruling over wide acres of abbey lands and gathering in their rents and tithes, were as rich and powerful as the highest of the nobles. Meanwhile, the lower ranks of the clergy, especially the village priests, were miserably paid and went to swell the ranks of malcontents.

Besides this a schism had taken place in the Church, dividing the higher clergy into two camps. These were known as the evangelists or Christians and the politicians, the former standing for the supremacy of the Catholic faith and the strict censorship of the press, the latter for tolerance towards the new ideas disseminated by the philosophers and Freemasons.

Meanwhile the Protestants demanded relief from the disabilities from which they had suffered since the revocation of the Edict of Nantes; they were still unable to practise their religion openly, their marriage services had no legal sanction and they were precluded from occupying important posts in the State. This question of religious liberty for all forms of faith was one of the first and most important problems with which Louis XVI was faced.

It will be seen then that in this France of 1774 everyone was discontented, for even amongst the 'privileged,' who had no grievances, the spirit of '*fronde*' had spread. It was good form, says Mme de la Tour du Pin, to complain of everything. One was tired of going to Court, the ladies-in-waiting must go and sup in Paris two or three times a week to vary the monotony of Versailles. The officers grumbled at being all day in uniform. 'A spirit of revolt reigned in every class.'

This boredom had set in under Louis XV. In 1765 Horace Walpole, during one of his visits to Paris, had



written: 'Laughing is as much out of fashion as *pantins* or *bulboquets* [dancing Jack, or cup and ball]. Good folks, they have no time to laugh. There is God and the King to be pulled down first; and men and women, one and all, are devoutly employed in the demolition. They think me quite profane for having any belief left.'

The idea of a general *bouleversement*, of the complete overthrow of all existing conditions which had taken hold of minds all over the country, was the work not only of the philosophers—Voltaire, Rousseau, Mably, Diderot, d'Alembert, etc.—but of the power behind them that since 1725 had been growing in force—the power of French Freemasonry. I have described in detail the developments of this formidable organization throughout the eighteenth century in my book on *Secret Societies and Subversive Movements*, where it was shown that there can be no question of implicating the Freemasonry of our country in the destructive theories that emanated from the French lodges. Indeed the Grand Orient, founded in 1772, with the Duc de Chartres as Grand Master, is now, as then, the bitter enemy of the Grand Lodge of England. It is unnecessary here to recapitulate the gradual stages by which the Freemasonry of France became impregnated with revolutionary doctrines which it promulgated in the great work carried out under its auspices—the famous *Encyclopédie*.

Besides Freemasonry a number of other secret societies had sprung into being, and occultism had become the rage in Paris. The men and women of the salons who had lost faith in God and found the simple doctrines of Christianity too difficult of belief, allowed themselves to be carried away by the reveries of Saint Martin, the miracles of Saint Germain and the incantations of Cagliostro. This mixture of credulousness and incredulity, this disbelief in principles that had stood the test of time and eagerness for novelty and untried theories, laid minds open to the political Utopias conjured up by the philosophers.

The dreary atheism of the salons described by Horace

Walpole, the cynicism of the literary circles of Paris, the hotter disputes that took place even in the cafés of provincial towns, though apparently the outcome of 'philosophy,' received their secret inspiration from the lodges of the Freemasons and 'illuminés.'

It was not that either philosophy or Freemasonry had created the discontent that now prevailed all over France—the spirit of *fronde* had existed before the opening of the first lodge in 1725—but that the organization of Freemasonry, added to the doctrines of the philosophers, gave to that discontent a form, a programme, a method of working which made it in the end into that mighty engine of destruction which, after undermining the monarchy of France, has continued to this day to sap the foundations of religion, social order and morality in that unhappy country.

What of the morality of eighteenth-century France? Here we come to a point on which it is difficult to dogmatize. Contemporary as well as modern French writers are in the main agreed in condemning the decay of morals during the eighteenth century, and there can be no doubt that the open immorality of Louis XV provided a deplorable example for the nation. But was society in general really more corrupt than at other periods of French history? Certainly not more, but less so, than formerly in the infamous days of the Regent, when not mere immorality but the most shameless indecency became the fashion.

Under Louis XVI and even under Louis XV, on the contrary, great outward decency prevailed. Even a married woman, if still young, could not receive a visit from a man unless the door of the room were left open, nor would he dare to sit beside her on a sofa, but only at a respectful distance. To place his hand on the back of the chair on which she was seated was to transgress the rules of decorum. Waltzing at balls was regarded as improper.

Horace Walpole, writing from Paris in 1766, observed: 'It requires the greatest habitude to discover the smallest

connexion between the sexes here. No familiarity, but under the veil of friendship, is permitted, and Love's dictionary is as much prohibited as at first sight one should think his ritual was. All you hear, and that pronounced with non-chalance, is that Monsieur *un tel* has had Madame *une telle*.'

Women of course had lovers—when in France have they not had lovers?—but even the most immoral 'would never have allowed herself to do anything improper in public, or to make indelicate remarks in the presence of a young girl.'<sup>1</sup>

Immoral literature was banned; on the stage adultery, the one theme of modern French drama, could not be presented. Mme de Genlis was horrified at the coarseness of the English theatre compared with that of France. Philosophers might attack religion, but novels ridiculing it were not permitted. Divorce was non-existent; the worst that could happen to an unfaithful wife, not married to a *mari complaisant*, was to be sent into a convent.

It may be argued that vice thus concealed by a veneer of propriety was all the worse in its hypocrisy and none the less contagious. But if it is admitted that the open immorality of Louis XV exercised a demoralizing influence over the nation, must it not be conceded that covert immorality was to be preferred in that it did not set a scandalous example to the public? And does not hypocrisy consist rather in the habit common to French writers of denouncing the corrupt morals of eighteenth-century France as if modern Paris were a model of virtue? Mme Roland wrote eloquently of the '*mœurs corrompus des aristocrates*,' but she too, wearied by 'the virtuous Roland,' had her Buzot. And what of the morals of the revolutionaries themselves? Of the Directoire? Of the Consulate? Or—to come to more modern times—of the Second Empire? For Napoleon III had his Bellenger!

Or, to go further afield, what of modern New York, and, let us admit it, modern London, where to change husbands or wives on the lightest pretext has become the fashion

<sup>1</sup> D'Allonville, i 372.

which one is stigmatized as old-fashioned for condemning? It would probably not be an exaggeration to say that at no period of the world's history has the sanctity of the marriage tie been held so lightly as to-day.

Let us have done then with this attitude of Pharisaical superiority towards the men and women of old France, their frailty was the frailty common to all human nature, and if many of them were immoral and some of them vicious, they did not flaunt vice as vice is flaunted to-day by every means of publicity—the novel, the cinema and the theatre. Compared with English society at the same period or with the brainless bucks or hard-drinking, hard-riding squires of the Georgian era they were polished and humane. Too fond of amusement, too little attentive to their duties, too much given to change and movement—Gouverneur Morris blamed their new habit of week-ending—they formed none the less a society more highly cultivated, more appreciative of art, of literature, of music, of all that lends colour and charm to life, than any society the world has ever seen. Anatole France, Socialist though he was, pays an unconscious tribute to the old régime in his comment on the Chevalier de Boufflers and the Comtesse de Sabran :

‘Minds such as theirs, at the same time strong and frivolous, tender and ironical, could only be produced by a long and learned culture. Old Catholicism and young philosophy, dying feudalism and dawning liberty contributed to form them with their piquant contrasts and their rich diversity. Such as they were, a Boufflers, a Sabran, honour humanity. These proud and charming beings could only have been born in France and in the eighteenth century.’<sup>1</sup>

No, France of 1774 was not, as many writers would have us believe, rotten to the core. There was much that was good and wholesome even in society—husbands and wives who loved each other, *grands seigneurs* who cared for their people, *grandes dames* who visited the sick and needy, men and women who in the terrible days to come were to show

<sup>1</sup> *La Vie Littéraire*, p. 159.

a sublimity of courage and a fortitude on the scaffold which was to evoke the admiration of the world.

All that was needed at this crisis was a man to lead the country, to deal with the vast discontent that had settled on it like a blight and pave the way for the new order, the Golden Age that was to regenerate France.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE REFORMATION BEGINS

IN the preceding chapters an attempt has been made to convey some idea of the chaotic state of affairs on the accession of Louis XVI. This is absolutely essential to an understanding of his character and conduct throughout the course of his reign. Everyone agrees in calling him weak, but who has tried to put himself in his place and consider the problems that confronted him? To settle the grievances of each class in turn without irritating other classes, to relieve the sufferings of the peasants without antagonizing the nobles on whom the monarchy depended for support, to give greater liberty to the Protestants without alienating the most loyal section of the Church, to reform government without shaking the foundations of the State, to revive the spirit of the army without plunging the country into war, to reduce taxation and at the same time restore the ruined finances, to regenerate morals, purify the Court, and last but not least reconcile the factions and the hostile elements within the royal family itself—was ever a king called upon to undertake a task so vast and bewildering in its complications? Yet these were the problems the boy of nineteen was called upon to face, and that he has been described as weak and imbecile for failing to solve. Had he been the lethargic being that historians usually represent him, he would have been content to leave things as they were, but it was his own ardour for reform which led him into all the difficulties that beset him. Once we have realized the nature of these we may come to ask ourselves whether the strongest man and the greatest genius could have extricated himself from the maze. In the light of after events we can see where he

the late King during his illness, and were kept in quarantine for nine days on account of the infection. But Maurepas was too clever for him.

'Your Majesty then makes me Prime Minister?' he asked at the end of the interview.

'No,' said Louis XVI, 'that was not at all my intention.'

'I understand. Your Majesty wishes that I should show him how to do without one.'<sup>1</sup>

And Maurepas found himself President of the Council, a Minister without portfolio. At the same time he took up his abode in the gilded attics vacated by Mme du Barry, over the King's apartments.

The rest of the Cabinet left by Louis XV consisted of the Abbé Terray, Comptroller General of Finances, the Chancellor Maupeou, the Duc de la Vrillière, Minister of the Interior, the Duc d'Aiguillon, who combined War and Foreign Affairs, and Bourgeois de Boynes at the head of the Admiralty.

On the 20th of May the King held his first Council, at which he gave the Ministers his orders for future days and hours of meeting, and signified his intention of being present.

'I wish,' he said, 'to acquire a profound knowledge of all that concerns the prosperity of my kingdom. Above all, Messieurs, do not forget the maxim of Saint Louis: "Everything that is unjust is impossible."'<sup>2</sup>

His next step was to change the whole Cabinet, with the exception, for the moment, of the Duc de la Vrillière, brother-in-law of Maurepas. On June 2, the Duc d'Aiguillon, warned of the King's intention, resigned, and was replaced by the Maréchal de Mury at the War Office and by the Comte de Vergennes at the Foreign Office. On July 20 Turgot took the place of de Boynes at the Admiralty. But the most sensational event was the dismissal, on August 24, of the Chancellor Maupeou and the Abbé Terray. Both these men had made themselves detested by the public,

<sup>1</sup> Campan, p. 88, note de l'éditeur

<sup>2</sup> De Falloux, p. 36

Maupeou for exiling the old Parlements in 1771, Terray for his alleged speculations in corn. The populace, enchanted at their fall, burnt them both in effigy, and Terray himself narrowly escaped being thrown into the Seine at Choisy.

This day of August 24 was christened the 'Saint Barthélemy of Ministers,' though the Spanish ambassador suggested that it might more aptly be called the 'Massacre of the Innocents.' The *poissardes* (fishwives) did not think so. Always privileged under the old régime to come and express their opinions on current events, they hastened to congratulate Louis XVI on the clean sweep he had made of all but one of the old Ministry. 'I am assured,' writes Stormont, 'that the first time the King went a hunting after the Chancellor's disgrace, the *poissardes* of Compiègne followed him with acclamations of "Vive le Roi!" and said, "Votre Grand Père a bien chassé mais il n'a jamais fait une aussi belle chasse que celle que vous venez de faire!"'

As a climax to the popular rejoicings, Turgot, replaced at the Admiralty by Sartines, was now made Comptroller General of finances.

Anne Robert Jacques Turgot, born in 1727, had been since 1761 intendant of Limoges, where he had distinguished himself by the most enlightened reforms and by his stand against the Abbé Terray in the matter of fresh taxation. Besides creating charitable workshops (*ateliers de charité*), he had constructed magnificent roads not made by *corvées* or forced labour, which he succeeded in replacing by fair taxation. As an economist, a friend of the philosophers and a contributor to the *Encyclopédie*, his advent to the Ministry was applauded by all 'advanced thinkers' of the day. That under these circumstances Louis XVI should have placed him in control of the finances—the most important post of all—was evidence of great courage and of the young King's sincere desire for reform. The responsibility for this appointment was shared by Maurepas, whose motives for approving it were very different; with little concern for the public welfare, Maurepas saw in this 'popular' choice a means for



increasing his own credit, and the ovation he received justified his anticipations. Louis XVI, on the other hand, liked Turgot; their two characters had much in common.

In the prime of life at forty-seven, Turgot was a man of fine appearance, with his noble forehead surmounted by magnificent brown hair that swept down over his shoulders, his clear brown eyes and well-marked features, but he held himself badly, walked awkwardly and displayed the same *gaucherie* as the King. Like Louis XVI, he had been shy and farouche as a child, hiding himself behind a screen or beneath a sofa when his mother was receiving friends, and remaining in this retreat throughout their visits. Mme Turgot, instead of helping him to overcome his timidity, only showed impatience because he would not bow gracefully and appeared 'savage and taciturn.'<sup>1</sup> In after life he could never conquer his embarrassment in society, the least thing made him blush, and, though his mouth and teeth were charming, his smile was apt to be so nervous as to convey an impression of contempt.

It is easy to understand how Louis XVI, also the product of a repressed and lonely childhood, felt himself drawn towards this shy and awkward man, like himself 'out of it' amongst courtiers but at home with the people and eager to redress their wrongs. Maurepas does not seem to have brought pressure to bear on him to make this appointment, but only to have hastened his decision. On that fateful 24th of August he had presented himself to the King, and urged him to make up his mind one way or the other.

'If you wish to keep your present Ministers say so, if you do not, say so equally and nominate their successors,' was the gist of his discourse.

The King answered that he wished to change them, but in a few days' time. Maurepas said there was no time to lose. 'You must give your decision before I leave your presence.'

'But I am overwhelmed with business and I am only

<sup>1</sup> P Foncin, *Essai sur le Ministère de Turgot* (1877), p 2.

twenty. All this distresses me,' said the King. And to Maurepas' persistent demand that he should either keep the Abbé Terray or dismiss him, Louis replied:

'You are right, but I did not dare. Only four months ago they had accustomed me to be afraid of even speaking to a Minister.'

But Maurepas repeated: 'Will you or will you not change your Ministers?'

'Yes,' said the King finally. 'M. Turgot shall have control of finances.'

The great choice had been made at last, the choice fraught with such vast possibilities for the future of France.

Maurepas, now contrite at the impatience he had shown, said: 'Sire, forgive me, I became too heated.'

'No,' said Louis, placing his hand affectionately on his shoulder, 'do not fear. I am sure of your integrity, and that is enough for me. You will please me by always telling me the truth with the same force. I need it.'<sup>1</sup>

Louis XVI well realized his own weakness when coming to decisions; unhappily, Maurepas was not the man to help him to overcome it. As after events showed, in his rôle of mentor, he contributed still further to the King's inferiority complex. But his support on this occasion had nerved Louis XVI to make the choice to which he was personally inclined.

Turgot, though not anxious to exchange his control of the navy for that of finances, was, however, obliged to come and thank the King for the appointment.

Louis XVI opened this first interview by asking: 'You did not want to be Comptroller General?'

'Sire, I admit to your Majesty that I preferred the Admiralty because it was a safer post where I could be more certain of doing good, but at this moment it is not to the King I give myself but to the good man.'

Louis XVI, taking him by both hands, answered: 'You shall not be disappointed.'

<sup>1</sup> *Journal de Vérité*, 1 185, 186

‘Sire,’ added Turgot, ‘I must impress on your Majesty the necessity for economy of which you must be the first to give the example. No doubt the Abbé Terray told your Majesty the same.’

‘Yes,’ said Louis, ‘he told me, but he did not tell me as you have.’<sup>1</sup>

According to another account of this memorable interview, Turgot observed that all he had said was somewhat confused, since he still felt ill at ease. ‘I know you are timid,’ said the King, ‘but I know too that you are firm and upright and that I could not have made a better choice.’

Turgot asked to be allowed to put his ideas in writing.

‘Yes,’ answered the King, ‘and I give you my word of honour beforehand to enter into all your views and to uphold you in whatever courageous measures you may take.’<sup>2</sup>

Turgot went out touched to the heart. The next day he wrote a long letter to the King in which he indicated the three main points of his programme—or, according to other accounts, reminded the King of the three points he had himself put forward at their interview<sup>3</sup>—these were:

No bankruptcy.

No increase in taxation

No loans.

In order to avoid such measures as solutions to the financial crisis Turgot urged that there was only one way—strict economy, the reduction of expenses below receipts so as each year to save twenty millions and employ them in paying off old debts. Foreseeing the opposition that would arise in interested quarters, he had the courage to add these words of warning: ‘You must arm yourself with your goodness of heart against that goodness of heart and consider whence comes the money you can distribute to your courtiers, compare the misery of those from whom it is wrested by the most painful process, with the condition of the people who are most entitled to your liberalities. Your Majesty must

<sup>1</sup> *Lettres de Julie de Lespinasse*, p. 113

<sup>2</sup> *Journal de Verd*, 1 187

<sup>3</sup> P. Foncin, *op. cit.* p. 49

not enrich those he loves at the expense of his people's substance.' And he went on to say: 'I shall be alone in combating the host of prejudices opposing all reforms, and against the generosity of your Majesty and of those most dear to him.'

He ended by saying: 'The touching kindness with which you pressed my hands in yours as if to accept my devotion will never be effaced from my memory and will sustain my courage.'<sup>1</sup>

The reference in this letter to the generosity of the King to those most dear to him has been taken by certain writers to indicate the Queen and to imply a warning against allowing her to spend too freely. But it seems more probable that Turgot had other members of the royal family and their friends in mind when he wrote these words, for Marie Antoinette had shown no signs of extravagance as yet.

Let us consider what part she had played throughout this crisis. As soon as the question of a change of Ministers arose Marie Antoinette undoubtedly hoped for Choiseul. And quite definitely she wished to get rid of the Duc d'Aiguillon. Although, as Mercy's correspondence with Maria Theresa shows, she had displayed great reluctance to interfere in politics or even to interest herself in them, she realized that there could be no peace for her as long as the Aiguillon faction remained in power. A man of vile character, the Duke, as 'the cruel and lawless Governor of Brittany,'<sup>2</sup> had made himself detested in that province, and a petition was made against him to Louis XV by the Parlement of Rennes. It was only through the intervention of Mme du Barry that he escaped a degrading sentence; it was also under her protection that he had come to the Court and entered the Ministry in 1771 with Maupeou and Terray. With this record, added to the fact that he headed the anti-Choiseul faction hostile to Marie Antoinette, is it any wonder that she wished for his removal and used her influence with the

<sup>1</sup> Ségur, *Au Couchant*, 1 147

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Young, *Travels in France* (1912 edition), p. 65 note.

King to obtain it? The subsequent conduct of the Duke proved how rightly she had judged him, for although she magnanimously prevented his exile, which would otherwise have followed on his dismissal, d'Aiguillon showed his gratitude by setting himself at the head of a cabal in Paris for the purpose of vilifying the Queen and spreading atrocious libels against her.<sup>1</sup>

But though Marie Antoinette had been able to bring about the fall of d'Aiguillon, she could not obtain the recall of Choiseul to the Ministry. All that she could persuade Louis XVI to do was to declare his exile ended and permit him to return to the Court, which was then at La Muette. Choiseul arrived there on June 12, 1774, but the King, concealing his embarrassment beneath his usual brusquerie, greeted him with the words: 'You have grown fatter, Monsieur de Choiseul, and you have lost your hair . . . you are getting bald.' The Queen attempted in vain to make up for this churlish reception by gracious words and charming smiles—the Duke took the hint and went home to make hay at Chanteloup.<sup>2</sup>

Marie Antoinette seems to have accepted this reverse lightly; it was not in her nature to brood over things that displeased her, and she was ready to welcome Turgot warmly to the Ministry when he presented himself before her on his appointment to the Admiralty. The choice, writes Mercy, had been strongly approved by her.<sup>3</sup> And when in August he became Comptroller General she expressed the greatest satisfaction. 'M. Turgot,' she wrote to her mother, 'is a very honest man, which is most essential for the finances.'<sup>4</sup>

This point is important, as Marie Antoinette has been persistently represented as the enemy of Turgot; in reality, says her biographer, La Rocheterie, 'she entered into his reforms with the best will in the world,'<sup>5</sup> and at the outset

<sup>1</sup> Ségur, *Au Couchant*, 1. 70.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 202

<sup>3</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, II. 212.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 229.

<sup>5</sup> *Histoire de Marie Antoinette*, I. 222. De Véri observes: 'Elle avait aimé M. Turgot et l'a toujours estimé, après avoir cessé de le goûter,' *Journal*, II. 13.

of his Ministry demanded economy in the outlay of the Court. How is it then that at this juncture we find her privy purse (*cassette de la Reine*) has been more than doubled? This fact, baldly reported by historians as evidence of the Queen's extravagant demands for money, needs explanation.

Under the old régime the expenses of the Queens of France were paid out of at least three different funds. These were:—

1. The sum for the maintenance of the *Queen's household*, which for centuries had stood at 600,000 livres (£26,250). But, owing to the decline in the value of the livre and to the increase in luxuries and the cost of living, this sum had long proved inadequate and had to be supplemented by what was called the *dépenses extraordinaires*, which by July 1774—that is to say, during the reign of Marie Leczinska and the first three months of that of Marie Antoinette—had mounted up to no less than two million livres in the currency of that day (*i.e.* £87,500). The Queen had no control over these *dépenses extraordinaires*, which led to great abuses.<sup>1</sup>

2. The *cassette de la Reine* (or privy purse) for alms, presents, pensions and other acts of generosity, and for her *menus plaisirs*,<sup>2</sup> but not for anything in the way of dress. For this Marie Antoinette received the same as Marie Leczinska, that is 96,000 livres (£4,200) a year, and out of it she continued to pay pensions accorded by the late Queen. She had been obliged to do this even as Dauphine, when she received only 72,000 livres (£3,150) a year—a monthly sum of 6,000 livres (£262)—which, as Mercy explains, all passed through the hands of her treasurer, who kept back 2,500 livres a month for these pensions of Marie Leczinska's.<sup>3</sup> Mercy had urged her to get this arrangement changed, saying it was absurd she should have to carry out obligations she had never undertaken and which did not concern her, but she was too good-natured and easy-going to do anything

<sup>1</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, II. 211. Letter of July 31, 1774.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, II. 212

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, I. 69 and 278 Letter of October 20, 1770, and February 29, 1772.

about it.<sup>1</sup> Then her *garçons de chambre* received 100 louis a month for the expenses of her 'jeu,' and whether she lost or won she never saw any of this again. In fact Mercy declared at that date 'she has not an écu she can spend for herself and without anyone else being concerned in it.'<sup>2</sup>

3. *The Wardrobe*, for which 120,000 livres (£5,250) was allowed yearly, a fund which was administered entirely by the *dame d'atours* (lady of the bedchamber).

In 1772 Mercy discovered that vast peculations had taken place in this department and the yearly sum was exceeded to such an extent as to amount to 350,000 livres (£15,312) in eighteen months—an excess of 170,000 (£7,437). The Duchesse de Villars, lady of the bedchamber, had been unable to check what Mercy describes as the 'enormous pillage' that had taken place, and her successor, the Duchesse de Cossé, appalled at the state of affairs, was at first inclined to attribute it to the Dauphine's fancies. But Mercy, intervening, was able to show that Marie Antoinette 'had never chosen or demanded a single dress but had left everything to her lady of the bedchamber, and that she had taken no part in the latter's want of economy.'<sup>3</sup> The fact was that in France of 1772, as still to-day, the system of commissions was openly recognized, everyone expected their bit, and money passing through innumerable hands stuck to all in turn.<sup>4</sup> In going through the accounts it was found that these peculations were carried out largely by the ladies'-maids, who demanded fabulous quantities of ribbons and materials of all kinds, which doubtless were never used and passed into their hands as perquisites.

<sup>1</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, 1 278

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 1 69.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 1 277. Letter of February 29, 1772

<sup>4</sup> This system was of long standing. Louis XV had been known to say: 'The robberies in my household are enormous but it is impossible to stop them, too many people, and too many powerful people, have an interest in them' Taine shows that, under Louis XVI, 'Madame Elizabeth, who is so sober, is supposed to consume 30,000 francs worth of fish a year, 70,000 francs worth of meat and game, to use 60,000 francs worth of candles. The King is supposed to drink every year lemonade and orgeat to the amount of 2,190 francs'—Editor's Note, *Journal de Vêri*, II. 431.

In July 1774 Mercy went minutely into the Queen's finances and found that as far as her pocket-money—or *menus plaisirs*—was concerned, she was the least well off of all the royal family.<sup>1</sup> Even good old Marie Leczinska had not found her privy purse of 96,000 livres enough and had been obliged to have her debts paid three times.<sup>2</sup> Marie Antoinette at the end of the first year had saved over 7,000 livres and had drawn only a small portion of the thousand louis allowed her by the Empress, which small portion, together with the savings on her privy purse, was distributed in alms and presents.<sup>3</sup> This habit of economy continued throughout the whole time during which she was Dauphine and on the accession of Louis XVI she had contracted no debts.<sup>4</sup>

As Queen, however, her expenses had increased, and with Marie Leczinska's pensions as well as her own to pay, her privy purse was found to be insufficient.

Now on the accession of Louis XVI the Comtes de Provence and d'Artois had seized the opportunity to improve their financial position by getting the pensions they were paying out of their privy purses put on to the royal Treasury; perhaps as brothers, instead of grandsons, of the reigning sovereign, they may by custom have been entitled to an increase of income. Meanwhile the three aunts had been left 200,000 livres (£8,750) a year by the will of Louis XV, which, added to what they had before, made them richer than the Queen though with fewer demands on their purses.<sup>5</sup>

Marie Antoinette therefore suggested to Mercy that the same might be done for her as for her brothers-in-law, and that the pensions she was paying out of her privy purse might be put on the Treasury. But Mercy held that it was more worthy of the Queen's dignity that her pensioners should be directly beholden to her for these liberalities and, therefore,

<sup>1</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, II 211 Letter of July 31, 1774.

<sup>2</sup> *Lettres de Marie Antoinette*, I. 79.

<sup>3</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, I 278. Letter of February 29, 1772.

<sup>4</sup> *Lettres de Marie Antoinette*, I 80 note.

<sup>5</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, II. 210, 211. Letter of July 31, 1774.



in order to meet them, that her privy purse should be increased. At the same time he proposed that the fund, known as *dépenses extraordinaires*, for the maintenance of the Queen's household should be done away with and the sums thus saved should be transferred to the privy purse so that no fresh demands should be made on the Treasury.<sup>1</sup> No increase was to be made, or was desired by the Queen, in the matter of the wardrobe,<sup>2</sup> where Mercy apparently succeeded in putting down some of the 'robberies' that had been taking place.<sup>3</sup>

So far then from Marie Antoinette asking the King for money, Mercy relates that she refused to speak to him on the subject,<sup>4</sup> and the whole arrangement described above was carried out by Mercy without her knowledge and, what is most important, *with the full approval of Turgot*, whom Mercy describes as 'devoted to her Majesty.'<sup>5</sup>

'I must do justice to the Comptroller General,' Mercy writes on October 20, 'in that, at the first word he forestalled the arguments that could have been added on this matter, and with the greatest zeal undertook to make the King feel, as if on his own initiative, the necessity for the arrangement in question. In consequence it was decided with the Minister that the Queen's privy purse, which was of 96,000 livres, should be raised to 200,000 livres annually, and at the moment of writing I have reason to be assured that this will be approved and settled during the work done by the Comptroller General with the King in the course of the day. The Queen knew absolutely nothing of this little negotiation, she will only hear of its outcome from the King, who will announce it to her himself and will therefore have the credit in her eyes of having thought of it on his own account.'<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, II, 212. Letter of July 31, 1774.

<sup>2</sup> P de Nolhac, *Autour de la Reine*, p 259.

<sup>3</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, I, 277. Letter of February 29, 1772.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 242. Letter of September 28, 1774.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 271. Letter of December 18, 1774.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 249. Letter of October 20, 1774.

Let us now see what was Marie Antoinette's attitude with regard to Turgot's first reform relating to corn supplies.

The edict of September 13, 1774, establishing the free circulation of corn throughout the country, was his first great popular measure. This fiscal question had occupied the attention of succeeding Ministers for many years, and the system of commerce in grain had varied, being sometimes Free Trade and sometimes Protectionist, according to times of scarcity or of abundance. In 1749 Machault had established free trade, and even the exportation of supplies, but this measure had been revoked by Terray, and the peasants were still obliged to sell their corn in the market and bear the cost of storage and transport, instead of being able to deal directly with their neighbours or seigneurs. This profited the middlemen and monopolizers, and at the same time made the Government responsible for supplies. The plan of the 'blés du Roi' was still maintained by Terray under the name of *régies* (administration), but these, as we saw in the last chapter, were handed over to the control of a company that during the Revolution, and not before then, became known as the Pacte de Famine. It is important to note that this term was never heard until September 15, 1789, when the *Moniteur*, on the authority of a certain Le Prévôt de Beaumont, announced the discovery of 'a monstrous conspiracy,' which had existed throughout sixty years for the purpose of starving France and enriching a company of monopolizers, who included several great personages. Until that date no one knew of its existence, and according to M. Gustave Bord it never did exist, but even under Terray was nothing but a society headed by one Malisset, for storing grain and provisioning the capital, whilst Terray himself merely authorized prudent purchases and sales made with discretion, on which the State lost money. At this distance of time it is impossible to know the truth. Terray certainly enjoyed an evil reputation amongst his contemporaries, both for the immorality of his private life and for the suspicions entertained with regard to his

speculations. Even so impartial an authority as Beaulieu speaks of his scandalous administration.

As to the company of Malisset, whether in itself a society of unscrupulous speculators or not, it maintained the principle of monopoly which led to abuses. For monopolizers there were right up to the Revolution and even after, and it was Marie Antoinette who, *before the appointment of Turgot* to the post of Comptroller General, warned the King against the so-called Pacte de Famine.

In a letter to Maria Theresa on August 15, 1774, Mercy says:

'The monopoly and provisioning of grain had raised the price of this article of food and caused an uproar; nevertheless this monopoly was going to be given again to the company that had enjoyed it and which paid a considerable remuneration to the royal Treasury. The King having consulted the Queen on this subject, Her Majesty, giving very good reasons, prevented the renewal of this monopoly, and when the public knows whence this decision came—this circumstance is certain to have a great effect, and infinitely increase the attachment of the public for the Queen.' <sup>1</sup>

And this is the woman who is supposed to have said: 'If the people have no bread, let them eat cake!'

It will be seen, then, that in the opinion of Mercy and of Marie Antoinette the Société Malisset was not quite as innocent as M Bord supposes, and did help to enrich the Treasury of Louis XV. On this point they may, of course, have been mistaken, yielding to rumours current at the time; M Bord's vast researches in the Archives of the period certainly seem to prove the contrary. At any rate Marie Antoinette, disapproving what was to be known as the Pacte de Famine, went further than Turgot in the matter of reforms. For Turgot, in his famous edict of September 13, whilst abolishing the King's granaries, did *not* suppress the Société Malisset. The Government, he said, having many other matters to attend to, could not carry on the corn trade

<sup>1</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, II. 221.

as efficiently as merchants who had nothing else to do, and he advanced much the same arguments as are used against State control of production and distribution—the formula of State Socialism to-day—namely, that Government agents, having less interest in economy than private agents, buy at a higher price, spend more on transport and take less care of supplies.<sup>1</sup> So, whilst his edict dealt a blow to monopolizers—or at any rate was intended to do so—it did not destroy them. On this point Turgot's panegyrist, M. Foncin, is explicit: 'Turgot did not put an end to the Pacte de Famine as M. Henri Martin seems to think and as no doubt M. Turgot thought himself.' The company of Malisset, with various changes in management, continued up to the Revolution.

How does the *Moniteur*, through its mouthpiece Le Prévot de Beaumont, account for this action on the part of a Minister who had remained the idol of the revolutionaries? By saying that Turgot 'wanted to dissolve a company of which the profits were only founded on public calamity,' but that the famines of 1775, 1776, and the Guerre des Farines (which occurred in the former year) showed him that 'the policy of a financier-minister must be different from that of a citizen-minister, and that the rights of humanity could not enter into the morals or the calculations of a Comptroller General ...'<sup>2</sup>

This sentence, typical of revolutionary verbiage, can only be interpreted as meaning that either Turgot did not recognize the necessity of doing away with the company, or that, even after the King and Queen had condemned it, he lacked the courage to attack the vested interests of the monopolizers. What he did do was to take the supplies of corn out of the King's granaries, which had been left and paid for by the Abbé Terray to the amount of over 6,000,000 livres, and throw them suddenly upon the market. This was the main cause of the explosion to which we shall return later.

The next great question of the new reign to be considered was the Affaire des Parlements.

<sup>1</sup> Foncin, *op. cit.*, p. 104

<sup>2</sup> *Moniteur*, i. 473, of Sept. 15, 1789.

The old Parlements of France, not to be confused with the Parliament of our country, were bodies of magistrates which dated back to very early times. The first to be instituted was the Parlement of Paris, said to have originated at the time of Saint Louis. Although designed to administer justice the Parlements had gradually arrogated to themselves political powers, bringing them into conflict with the royal authority. For a century and a half before the accession of Louis XVI, a continuous duel had been waged between the King and the Parlements, which reached its climax under Louis XV and the Ministry of Choiseul. In spite of the resistance of the Parlements to his financial schemes, Choiseul hoped to reconcile but not suppress them. The Chancellor Maupeou, however, whilst owing his position to Choiseul, after the Duke's exile hastened to bring off a coup d'état, and on January 19, 1771, the Parlements were dissolved at a solemn *lit de justice* held by the King at Versailles. In their place were instituted 'King's councils,' and on April 13 a new Parlement was formed which came to be known as the Parlement Maupeou, introducing great reforms—the suppression of the old custom by which magistrates bought their posts, also free justice and the simplification of legal procedure.

This measure, all to the advantage of the people, raised a storm of opposition from the noblesse and the *haute bourgeoisie* headed by the Princes de Condé, de Conti, and the Duc d'Orléans. The Prince de Conti was in fact 'the soul of the opposition.'

But Maupeou carried matters through in the face of all resistance; by the end of 1771 the new system was beginning to work well and in December 1772 a half-hearted reconciliation was effected between the King and the princes of the blood. Thus at the death of Louis XV the vexed question seemed to have been settled, but the new reign stirred all the trouble up again.

The people, blind to their own interests, had remained faithful to the members of the old Parlements who, in spite

of the abuses of the system, were many of them worthy of respect. Thus, in the main the populace was on the side of the princes against the King and the Chancellor. Maurepas, on his accession to power in May 1774, therefore saw a chance of winning fresh popularity by bringing about their recall. In co-operation with the Duc d'Orléans, who had remained *parlementaire* at heart, a memoir was drawn up which the Duke handed to Louis XVI in June at Marly, describing the sad plight of the dethroned magistrates 'languishing in exile.' Maurepas skilfully followed this up in conversation with the King, pretending to criticize the memoir but hinting that the new Parlement was not well thought of and disparaging Maupeou and his following. The King appeared touched and might have yielded but for the indiscretion of the Duc d'Orléans, who boasted of the manœuvre to Mme de Montesson, hismorganatic wife, and the King hearing of this, suspected collusion between the Duke and the Mentor, and refused to walk into the trap.

At this moment the 'ceremony of the catafalque' was about to take place, that is to say the solemn obsequies of Louis XV, to be celebrated at Saint-Denis with the new Parlement heading the procession. The Duc d'Orléans and his son the Duc de Chartres, whose place it was to walk with the other princes of the blood and salute the various bodies of the State, now declared that they would not pay honour to the new Parlement. Thereupon, the day before the ceremony, on July 24, the King exiled them both to Villers-Cotterets. The people, siding with the princes who had done nothing to win their gratitude, resented this display of the royal authority, and the King and Queen returning from Saint-Denis along the Paris boulevards were received in stony silence. Louis XVI, always over-sensitive to popular feeling, was deeply affected. The rusé Maurepas knew how to work on his emotions.

The annoyance of the people was, however, counter-balanced by their joy at the appointment of Turgot to the Admiralty, and their renewed good-humour expressed itself

in loud acclamations of the new reign. Maurepas cunningly interpreted these to Louis XVI as manifestations in favour of the recall of the old Parlements.

Once more the King found himself on the horns of a dilemma: pulled one way by Maurepas, the other by Maupeou, with the Comte de Provence writing memoirs against the recall, the aunts falling on their knees and begging him with tears not to insult the memory of their father by agreeing to it, and on the other hand the princes of the blood in open revolt against him for not agreeing to it, Louis XVI continued to waver between two opinions. Unable to come to a decision, he made up the various letters and memoirs on the subject submitted to him into two bundles, carefully labelled them 'Opinions favourable to the return of the old Parlements,' and 'Opinions favourable to the present Parlements,' and put them away in a cupboard.

But the 24th of August decided the great question. We have already seen how on this memorable day he hesitated over the dismissal of his Ministers Maupeou and Terray, and how Maurepas forced him to make up his mind. Once that decision was made and Maupeou had fallen, the way was clear for the recall of the old Parlements. On the 10th of November the former councillors were summoned to a *lit de justice* to be held in the hall of Saint Louis at the Palais de Justice in Paris two days later.

On the 12th, at seven o'clock in the morning, the King set forth with his brothers at the head of a vast procession and passed through the streets of Paris amidst the acclamations of the assembled multitudes. 'The canaille of Paris,' said the Baron de Frénilly, 'rejoiced without knowing why.'<sup>1</sup>

Was the King right or wrong in making this momentous decision? To this day opinions have been divided. Maria Theresa held that he was wrong. 'It is incomprehensible,' she wrote, 'that the King and his Ministers should destroy the work of Maupeou.'

<sup>1</sup> *Souvenirs du Baron de Frénilly*, p. 19.

Marie Antoinette took the opposite view, an essentially feminine view, rejoicing at an event that appeared to make everyone happy and enhance the King's prestige.

'The great affair of the Parlements has ended,' she wrote to her mother on November 16, 'everyone says that the King was marvellous. . . . Although I did not wish to interfere or even ask questions on these matters, I was touched by the confidence the King showed me. My dear mother will judge of this by the paper I send her, it is in the writing of the King who gave it to me the day before the *lit de justice*. All went off as he wished and the princes of the blood came to see us next day. I am full of joy at the thought that there is no-one now in exile and in trouble; when the Parlements were broken up half the Princes and the peers were against it, to-day everything has succeeded and yet it seems to me that if the King upholds his work his authority will be greater and more firmly established than in the past.'<sup>1</sup>

Contemporaries, however, remained divided into two opposing camps. Against the old Parlements were the Ministers Turgot, the Comte de Vergennes and the Maréchal de Mury, the Comte de Provence, the remains of the Duc d'Aiguillon's cabal, the old du Barry-ites, the philosophers, the economists and the Jesuits who, though suppressed, still existed. For the old Parlements were the Ministers Maurepas and Miromesnil, the princes of the blood, many leading dukes and princes, the Queen, the Comte d'Artois, the salons of Mme du Deffand and of the Comtesse de Boufflers,<sup>2</sup> the Duc de Choiseul and his friends, the bourgeoisie and also the people.

Modern French historians incline to the opinion of the former group. 'The reign of Louis XVI,' says M. Jacques Bainville, 'began with a grave mistake, the recall of the Parlements which provoked the drama of 1789.' Few people at the time foresaw the consequences of this mistake in setting up a power in opposition to the monarchy. 'It must

<sup>1</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, II 253.

<sup>2</sup> The mistress of the Prince de Conti known as '*l'idole du Temple*.'



appear strange,' wrote Arthur Young eighteen years later, 'in a government so despotic in some respects as that of France, to see the parliaments in every part of the kingdom making laws without the King's consent, and even in defiance of his authority. . . . I may remark that the bigotry, ignorance, false principles and tyranny of these bodies were generally conspicuous, and that the Court (taxation excepted) never had a dispute with the parliament, but the parliament was sure to be wrong.'<sup>1</sup>

Mme Campan, describing the sensation produced by the recall of the Parlements, says that 'Paris was intoxicated with joy and at most one person in a hundred was to be met who foresaw that the spirit of the old magistrature would always be the same and that before long it would make fresh attacks on the royal authority.'

For the Parlements showed no gratitude at their recall; haughty, offended, they resumed their places with the air of accepting an apology for their former treatment, and ready to show their power at the first opportunity.

One far-sighted spectator watching the royal procession returning amidst the plaudits of the crowd saw that on that day Louis XVI with his own hands had laid the first stone of the Revolution.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Travels in France* (1912 edition), p. 321.

<sup>2</sup> *Souvenirs du Baron de Frénilly*, p. 19.

## CHAPTER V

### LA GUERRE DES FARINES

IN placing Turgot at the head of the finances Louis XVI believed he had put the right man in the right place, and the applause that greeted his action has echoed down the pages of history. No modern writer would contest the fact that Turgot was an upright and honest man as well as a sincere reformer.

Unfortunately honesty and singleness of purpose are not always adequate equipments for political life. Turgot had evolved magnificent schemes for the regeneration of France; the trouble began when he attempted to put them into practice. And whilst his range of knowledge was immense he lacked one essential—a knowledge of human nature. It had seemed to him quite simple to relieve the people's need for bread by introducing free trade in corn. 'We must make laws on all this,' he repeated dogmatically, confident of his power to enforce them. His treatise on the subject had caused a profound sensation through the method of reasoning by which it was advocated. Voltaire wrote to d'Alembert saying: 'I have just read M. Turgot's masterpiece. It seems to me that here are a New Heaven and a New Earth.'

But the passing of the edict of September 13, 1774, was only half the battle. To establish internal free trade in grain was easy, but to keep down its price after a bad harvest was quite another matter. For one thing, the famous edict had not done away with the *droits d'octroi*, or tolls, so that the free circulation of corn was still hampered by such costs as corn dues, market dues, ell-measures and so on. Turgot had found that he was unable to abolish these everywhere

at once, though he succeeded in doing so in certain places by way of example. Then in order to make the plan succeed new roads were necessary, navigable canals, rapid means of transport. Otherwise, taking the grain out of the granaries would only alarm the people. It did alarm them. Peasants and nobles alike gave way to panic and the Parlement hesitated to register the edict. Instead it ordered an enquiry that enraged the philosophers. Turgot, however, said quietly: 'My edict will be registered'—and the Parlement gave in. At the same time a number of corn agents were dismissed without proof of their manoeuvres, which made the public suspicious that frauds of all kinds had been committed.

Then came a further sensation when Turgot suddenly threw on the market the six millions' worth of corn from the King's granaries. This brought about a momentary fall in the price of bread, but a rise followed which disappointed the people. So, even before the edict was put into force it had caused discontent.

Unfortunately the harvest of 1774 was a very bad one and the winter following unusually severe. There were long frosts, the roads became impassable, carts were sent to clear away the snow in vain. The difficulty of getting supplies to Paris became acute; bread grew dearer still. By the spring low murmurings were heard amongst the people. As a climax of calamity Turgot had fallen ill in January with his hereditary malady—gout. He had suffered from it since the age of thirty-three; this winter it attacked him cruelly. Racked with pain, he had to be carried in an armchair to the King's apartment every morning, where he remained three hours at a time discussing the situation with Louis XVI, who questioned him on every point, trusting him absolutely. As a result of these talks *ateliers de charité*, such as Turgot had instituted in Limoges, were created to relieve distress, foreign corn was imported, but the harvests abroad had been bad also, so still the price of bread went up.

In April the rumour went round that the people were threatened with starvation and that speculation in grain was being carried out for the purpose of paying off the late King's debts. At the same time unknown agitators, passing themselves off as peasants, appeared in the markets and began to fan up a panic. A secret campaign was started against Turgot; it was whispered that the King had wanted to reduce the price of bread to two sols but Turgot had been unwilling.

Then riots broke out in several places at once; on May 1, at Beauvais, Poissy, Saint-Germain, Meaux, Saint-Denis, and bands of men numbering, at Villers-Cotterets, up to 1500, began to raid the markets. All along the course of the Oise the boats carrying grain were pillaged and—a most significant point—the sacks of corn were not carried to the millers to be made into flour for bread, but ripped open and thrown into the river. It was noted, moreover, that these bandits were methodical and disciplined as if responding to a word of command. Meanwhile, mysterious emissaries stirred up the people, telling them they would die of hunger since the bread was being taken to Paris. It was then that the cry went up: 'To Versailles!'

This outbreak, known to history as the 'Guerre de Farines,' is of the first importance in studying the history of the Revolution. What has Carlyle to say about it? In a passage which—either because he was pleased with it or because he forgot he had written it before—he repeats three times in his work on the French Revolution, he says:

'So on the second day of May 1775, these waste multitudes do here, at Versailles Château, in widespread wretchedness, in sallow faces, squalor, winged raggedness, present, as in legible hieroglyphic writing, their Petition of Grievances. The Château gates have to be shut; but the King will appear on the balcony, and speak to them. They have seen the King's face; their Petition of Grievances has been, if not read, looked at. For answer, two of them are hanged,

on a "new gallows forty feet high," and the rest driven back to their dens,—for a time.'<sup>1</sup>

Now let us see what really happened.

The King had been occupying himself for months with the bread question in those three-hour conversations with gout-racked Turgot, and in order to acquire a clearer understanding of administration, had spent whole days working with Dupont, a celebrated economist, whom Turgot had chosen to instruct him. On this particular morning, the 2nd of May, the King, however, was starting for the hunt when he perceived a large crowd of evil-looking people, armed with sticks, arriving at Versailles by the road from Saint-Germain and making their way towards the market. The King then returned to the château, ordered the gates to be shut and sent orders to the Prince de Beauvau, captain of the bodyguard, to call out troops, but with the express stipulation not to allow them to use arms.

Turgot and Maurepas had just started for Paris, where further riots were feared, so the young King was left alone to deal with the situation. The Queen, deeply affected by what was taking place, remained in her apartments and ate nothing all day. Louis XVI on this occasion showed remarkable sang-froid and courage. The Princes de Beauvau and de Poix, summoned to his room, were given precise instructions; then the King wrote this letter to Turgot, dated eleven o'clock in the morning:

'Versailles is attacked and they are the same men of Saint-Germain. . . . You can count on my firmness. I have just ordered the guards to march on the market. I am very much pleased with the precautions you have taken on behalf of Paris, it was for there I was the most afraid. You will do well to arrest the people of whom you speak, but, above all, when you have got them—no haste and many questions. I have just given orders for what is to be done here and for the markets and mills in the neighbourhood.'

<sup>1</sup> Carlyle's *French Revolution*, Book II chap II, Book VI chap III, and Book VII chap VI.

The King's first thought was thus not for his own safety but for the safety of Paris and the protection of the markets, but no violent measures were to be taken and nothing done without due consideration.

The markets, however, were pillaged and several bakers' shops raided. Many of the crowd waved pieces of bad bread which, they cried out, was all the people had to eat. It was discovered afterwards that this bread had been concocted for the occasion with bran, rye and ashes mixed together and purposely made mouldy.

It was then, after the pillage had taken place, that the howling mob succeeded in penetrating the courts of the château. The King appeared on the balcony and attempted to say a few words, but his voice was drowned in the tumult; so, sad and discouraged, he went back to his room with tears in his eyes.

The guards now appeared in the courts of the château with the Prince de Beauvau at their head. The Prince was insulted and pelted with flour. He succeeded, however, in making himself heard, calling out: 'At how much do you want the price of bread to be fixed?' The crowd answered: 'At two sols!' 'Very well, then, at two sols let it be!' This act of weakness had the effect of quieting the crowd, who marched off to the bakers and demanded bread at the price named.

So ended the riot at Versailles. No one had been killed, one only had been wounded, a man who had been stirring up the people and was discovered, surprisingly, to be no starving peasant but the Comte d'Artois' chief cellarer. In the course of an altercation with one of the bodyguard, the soldier wounded him with his bayonet, and the man was taken to hospital. Apart from this one incident no display of force was made except that a few men with money and even gold louis in their pockets were arrested as suspect.

The same afternoon at two o'clock the King wrote a second letter to Turgot:

'We are absolutely peaceful. The riot was beginning to

grow rather violent but the troops here calmed them and they kept quiet. M. de Beauvau questioned them; most of them said they had no bread, that they had come to get it, and displayed very bad barley bread which they said they had bought for two sols, and that was all they were given. . . . I instructed the intendant to try and find out who was paying them, which I regard as the best capture. I am not going out to-day, not from fear, but in order to let everything settle down.' In a postscript the King added: 'M. de Beauvau interrupts me to tell me of a foolish manoeuvre that was made'—evidently the Prince did not dare to say that it was he who made it—'which was to let them have bread at two sols. He makes out there is no middle course between this and forcing them to take it at its present price. This bargain is made, but only for this first time, the greatest precautions must be taken to prevent them coming back to dictate laws; let me know what these should be, for this is very awkward.'

The postscript is important, since the 'foolish manoeuvre' referred to has been attributed to Louis XVI himself.<sup>1</sup> M. Foncin, in his monumental work on Turgot, commits this error, and even so excellent an historian as M. Casimir Stryienski repeats it in the words: 'He [the King] yields to the cries of the populace and has it proclaimed that the price of bread shall be two sous a lb. Turgot and his reforms were disavowed.' It was, of course, not for the King to intervene in so intricate a matter as the price of bread; nor was it in his power to control it. To have attempted it would have been, as MM. Foncin and Stryienski say, to upset the plans made by the Comptroller General.

Turgot, who had remained in Paris all day, cut to the heart by the way his good intentions were thwarted, returned to Versailles two hours later, and Louis XVI greeted him with the words: 'We have a clear conscience and with that we are very strong.' Both then agreed together that the

<sup>1</sup> The *Journal de Vérité*, i. 289, also says the King strongly disapproved it.

Prince de Beauvau's order must be revoked and the current price of bread restored.

Louis XVI on this occasion had shown courage, firmness and intelligence. Moved at first to tears by what he imagined to be a crowd of hungry peasants coming to ask him for bread, he had quickly realized that this was an engineered riot and that the important thing was to find out who was financing it. He saw too that to yield to clamour was to create a precedent destructive of law and order and that rioting crowds could not be allowed to dictate laws. If only he had shown the same firmness at thirty-four as when only twenty there might have been no Revolution. Turgot was the first to praise his behaviour on this day. 'The King,' he wrote that evening to the Abbé de Véri, 'is as firm as I am, but the danger is great because the trouble is spreading with inconceivable rapidity and the atrocious methods of the instigators are followed out with great intelligence. It is absolutely necessary to display vigour.'

To this Véri replied:

'Hold firm to your measures and above all, for the happiness of his life, keep your master firm. A Minister, dismissed through factious agitations, may find rest on his lands, but a King who gives in to them, perpetually provokes fresh ones and it is only in the grave that he can find peace. Had you been in the wrong, even very much in the wrong in your operations for the free circulation of grain, it is not seditious methods that should force a King to repair a wrong. He should first suppress them and then do the right thing with force. If the King is firm on this occasion all will go well.'<sup>1</sup>

Turgot now sent a message to Maurepas, who had remained comfortably in Paris throughout the day and who received the message—in his box at the Opera. 'Business—or rather, pleasure—as usual' was the motto of the Mentor.

The fears of Louis XVI and Turgot for the tranquillity of the capital proved to have been well founded. In spite of

<sup>1</sup> *Journal de Véri*, 1. 285.



the troops ordered to patrol the outskirts of the city throughout the night of May 2 and 3, bands of rioters succeeded in entering it through several gates at the same time—seven o'clock in the morning.

These bands consisted of men, women and even children, and it was noticed that the men, armed with heavy sticks, were what we should describe to-day as 'roughs,' and appeared to be 'in the best of spirits [*fort gais*]' ; the respectable working man took no part in the proceedings. As on the fateful 5th of October fourteen years later, it was further observed that a number of the 'women' were men in disguise. Another significant point was that the rioters were evidently marching to a word of command, perfect discipline was maintained and the leaders made use of a language that only the initiated could understand. When one of the marchers asked: 'Where are we going?' a leader replied: 'Three points and thirty-one,' and this code phrase being repeated all along the line, the whole band marched unhesitatingly in the direction indicated.

The marchers now proceeded to raid the bakers' shops and to pillage supplies in every direction. An attempt was made to attack the corn market with the object of ripping open the sacks of flour, but this was found to be well guarded by troops of musketeers, so the mob thought better of it and confined their attentions to the tradesmen. By midday not a loaf could be found for sale in Paris.

Throughout the morning both the army and police showed deplorable weakness. The troops, commanded by the Duc de Biron, were assembled for a military ceremony, the blessing of the flags, in another part of Paris, which the Duc refused to countermand for fear of alarming the population.

Except in the case of the corn market, the army did nothing at this stage to prevent disorders. Meanwhile the police, under the Lieutenant-General Lenoir, who were to be found here and there, adopted an attitude of masterly inactivity, saying they had been given the order 'in no case

to shoot and to let themselves be insulted rather than maltreat the populace.' Some of the police even helped the rioters.

As in all outbreaks of the Revolution, of which this *Guerre des Farines* was the first, indulgence only made matters worse and increased the audacity of the insurgents. At the beginning of the riot they had refrained from robbing the tills, but seeing that no resistance was to be offered, they now warmed to the work, broke into grocers' and confectioners' shops and carried off all the money they could find. The Abbaye de Saint Victor was next raided and its supplies pillaged. One woman, making a great noise, was arrested and put under guard, but then released to soothe the feelings of the crowd.

The suggestion was now made to march on the prison Bicêtre and to besiege the Bastille, but the Duc de Biron gave the alarm to the governor, M. de Jumilhac, and a platoon of musketeers was placed on guard. A band of rioters then went off to demonstrate under the window of Turgot's office, the 'Hôtel du Contrôle Général,' displaying the same mouldy loaves as the day before at Versailles with the same cry: 'This is what we are given to eat!' It was again proved that this bread had been turned green by a special process.

But even now the Lieutenant-General of Police, Lenoir, refused to act in spite of warning from his commissaries, saying that he had no orders and matters must be allowed to take their course. This, as will be seen later, was untrue.

The military leaders were at last, however, spurred to action. The blessing of the flags having ended, the Duc de Biron stationed troops at the cross-roads and platoons of musketeers were sent in all directions. The rioters, moreover, were growing tired and the soldiery had little difficulty in dispersing them without wounding or arresting anyone.

The Marquis de Ségur, in his admirable account of the *Guerre des Farines*, founded on contemporary documents, observes that the salient point of this day, May 3, was the

necessity for vigorous action which the police did not display. The weakness and inertia of Lenoir had stupefied the population of Paris and roused the indignation of the King's Council, which met that evening in his apartments to deliberate on the situation. As a result of the discussion that took place Turgot wrote next day to Lenoir saying: 'The way in which the work of the police had been carried out had facilitated events which in my opinion could easily have been prevented, since everything was known beforehand and we had agreed together the day before on successful measures for which you were answerable. These measures were not carried out, and you know it. . . .'

It was therefore an untruth on the part of Lenoir to say he had no orders, and Louis XVI did not hesitate to relieve him of his functions. 'Monsieur Lenoir,' he wrote, 'as your way of thinking does not accord with the line I have taken I must ask you to send me in your resignation.' Lenoir was then replaced by Albert, a friend of Turgot's.

In order to prevent a recurrence of these events it was decided in council to create two armies, one for the interior of Paris, the other for the environs, and 25,000 troops were collected for the purpose. At the same time the Council drew up a severe order forbidding the inhabitants of Paris or Versailles, under pain of death, to form riotous assemblies, to commit any violence on bakers' shops or grain stores or to demand with menaces that bread should be sold below the current price. In case of resistance the troops and the police would be obliged to fire. This notice was printed during the night and posted up next morning, to the general satisfaction.

Turgot, who had shown the utmost firmness throughout, was appointed to act as Minister for War in the department of Paris for the duration of the riots. According to one account, the King, having invested him with full powers, embraced him on parting and said: 'Go, my friend. When, like you and I, one has a clear conscience one need fear no one.'<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Journal de Vêri*, i. 288.

Another contemporary record stated, however, that at this moment Louis XVI felt a sudden misgiving and said anxiously to Turgot: 'Have we nothing with which to reproach ourselves?' Turgot, convinced that they had not, returned to Paris at four o'clock on the following morning, and it was soon seen that the measures taken were none too severe, riots were on the point of breaking out again, but the display of force acted as a deterrent. Meanwhile, the police surrounded the cabarets where the leaders had collected to triumph over their successes of the day before and plan fresh disturbances. As they came out of the doors the police arrested them, and by the afternoon a hundred and eighty had been rounded up.

It was now the turn of the Parlement of Paris to show its power. The previous evening of May the 3rd it also had met in council to deliberate on what had taken place, and it was decided that the President should go to Versailles 'in order to ascertain the intentions of His Majesty.' But on the advice of Turgot, the President, who had set forth at dawn, was met on the road by a courier bearing this letter from the King:

'I do not doubt that the zeal of my Parlement leads it to act in the present circumstances in order to remedy the disturbances of which I know the secret causes. As I am seriously concerning myself with the means of calming them and my Parlement might run counter to my views I do not wish it to concern itself with this affair lest it should upset the operations of my Council.'

This infuriated the Parlement, which then proceeded to post up notices asking that the King should be humbly requested to reduce the price of bread, with the natural result that the rioters, taking it as an encouragement, started trouble again, insulting the soldiers and spitting in their faces. Turgot indignantly ordered these posters to be removed by the musketeers, the printers' blocks to be broken up and the offending notices to be replaced by the one drawn up in council by the King and his Ministers.

The whole Parlement was then summoned to Versailles on the following day, and set forth in forty carriages, robed in black, because the King disliked the red robes they usually wore. On arrival at the château they were entertained to a magnificent banquet, which somewhat softened their ill-humour, so that it was a well-fed and almost cordial Parlement that awaited the royal commands. The King, who arrived at four o'clock, had composed a short speech for the occasion, but forgot it when the moment came and spoke impromptu, briefly and to the point. He said that he was determined to see to the subsistence 'of the good town of Paris and of my kingdom,' but he said also: 'I must and will stop dangerous brigandage that would soon degenerate into rebellion.'

He left it to his Chancellor, Hue de Miromesnil, to tell them what measures were to be taken to restore order, after which it would rest with the usual courts and tribunals to discover who were 'the *real culprits*, those who by underhand means had caused the excesses' which for the moment it was a question of suppressing.

Louis XVI ended the sitting, which had lasted only three-quarters of an hour, with a speech that certainly did not err on the side of weakness:

'You have heard,' he said, 'my intentions. I forbid you to make any remonstrances on the orders I have given or to do anything counter to them. I rely on your fidelity and your submission at a moment when I have resolved to take measures which ensure that during my reign I shall never again be obliged to have recourse to them.'

'These words,' wrote the contemporary journalist Hardy, 'were uttered by the young King with a force and a firmness infinitely beyond his years.' 'The fact is,' Louis XVI said afterwards to Turgot, 'I feel much more embarrassed with one man alone than with fifty.'

The Abbé de Véri, never too indulgent in his judgements of Louis XVI, wrote of this occasion: 'One must do justice to this prince for having shown, during the insurrection at

Versailles, a spirit of courage and a sang-froid which was not to be expected at his age and with his peaceful frame of mind. Thus M. Turgot, supported by his master, was provided with the necessary force against the insurgents.' <sup>1</sup>

What was the explanation of the King's change of character during the *Guerre des Farines*? For throughout the whole crisis his inferiority complex seems to have entirely vanished, and Turgot rightly observed: 'The King is as firm as I am.' Historians with one voice answer this question by saying: 'Because he had Turgot at his side.' True, but he had other men, stronger than Turgot, beside him at those future crises when he showed weakness. The answer is evidently that whilst those other men, who endeavoured to stiffen his resistance, did so as upholders of the royal authority alone, Turgot was a man who, he knew, stood for the cause of the people, and whose advice he could therefore follow with a clear conscience. When in answer to his anxious enquiry: 'Have we nothing with which to reproach ourselves?' Turgot said no, Louis XVI no longer wavered. It was said of him later that he was never weak where the people or religion were concerned. And once he could be persuaded that he was acting in the people's interest, not his own, he could play the King and even the autocrat, as at this *lit de justice* of May 5, 1775.

One might have expected an explosion of rage on the part of the Parlement at being thus addressed; not at all, the magistrates returned to Paris slightly intimidated but by no means displeased with the reception given them by His Majesty. They realized now that they had a King who knew how to rule, and the French, more than any nation, need to feel the hand upon the reins. Never at any moment of the Revolution did boldness and courage fail to win their respect; it was only when authority appeared to weaken that they turned on it with ridicule and defiance.

In Paris, however, the spirit of rebellion had not yet been crushed. The pillage and destruction of food supplies still

<sup>1</sup> *Journal*, 1, 287.

continued and infamous placards appeared on the walls: 'If the price does not go down we will exterminate the King and the whole race of Bourbons.' And actually on the door of the King's room in Versailles a notice was found bearing the words: 'If the price of bread does not go down and the Ministry is not changed we will set fire to the four corners of the château.' The Revolution was coming very near.

In the face of these sanguinary threats the course of justice was hastened, and out of two hundred malefactors arrested by the police some forty were sent to the Bastille. It should be noted that these were not the 'roughs' before referred to or poor creatures maddened by hunger, but prosperous bourgeois or people of good standing. Large sums of money were found on many of them; in one case as much as 500 louis. A member of the Parlement stated that during the riots, seeing a woman in great agitation, he had offered her an écu to buy bread, but she replied insolently, clinking the money in her pocket: 'Go on, we don't need your money, we have more than you have!' Another woman on horseback and in a riding-habit was amongst those arrested.

Two only were condemned to death. Jean Desportes, a master wigmaker and Jean Lesguille, a gauze-worker, who had both been caught in the act of theft and pillage. It was they who, by order of the Châtelet of Paris and with the approval of Turgot, were hanged on two gallows eighteen feet high, as an example to the rioters, whom this double execution effectually quelled. The King himself was moved to pity for the victims. 'If you could spare the people who have been only led away,' he wrote that evening to Turgot, who had remained in Paris, 'you would do well. M. de la Vrillière [the Minister of the Interior] has just told me of the two hangings that took place this evening; I very much wish that the leaders could be discovered.'

What then becomes of Carlyle's story of the starving multitude coming to ask the King for bread and 'for answer' two of them being 'hanged on a new gallows forty feet

high'? Not one of the crowd that assembled at Versailles was condemned to death, but only these two malefactors in Paris, without the knowledge of the King. And this is how the British public are taught history!

The one point on which Louis XVI, and still more Turgot, may be held to blame, is that a more searching enquiry was not made into the real authors of the trouble. That there was a plot nobody doubted, and it was attributed variously to Maupeou, the Abbé Terray, the English, the Jesuits, the clergy, the financiers and the monopolizers. In the opinion of M. Gustave Bord it was caused by speculators, who had hoped that the abolition of the King's granaries would afford them the opportunity to make vast profits, but the sudden flooding of the market with six millions' worth of corn by Turgot upset their calculations, and it was they who then stirred up the riots.

The most accredited opinion, and that which seems to have been held by Louis XVI, singled out the Prince de Conti as the chief instigator. 'The suspicions we had already are very dreadful,' the King wrote to Turgot on May 6, 'and it is very difficult to know what line to take. But unhappily those who have said this are not the only ones. I hope *for the sake of my name* that they are only calumniators.'

Turgot himself suspected this cousin of the King's who was known to be his sworn enemy.

Louis François, Prince de Conti, born in 1717, had married Louise Diane d'Orléans, the aunt of the Duc d'Orléans, father of 'Egalité.' The Princesse de Conti had died at the age of twenty and the Prince consoled himself with the Comtesse de Boufflers, who lived with him openly at the Temple in Paris. A man of no principles or morals, he hated Turgot for treating him with cold respect and refusing to pay court to him. In the matter of the Parlements, as we have seen, he had also shown himself the enemy of the King. And just before the *Guerre des Farines* he had fallen foul of Marie Antoinette. This was on the occasion of the visit of the Queen's brother, the Archduke Maximilian



of Austria, in February 1775. The three heads of the younger branches of the royal family—the Duc d'Orléans, the Prince de Condé and the Prince de Conti—had maintained that it was incumbent on the Archduke to pay them the first visit; the Archduke refused on the score that it was for them to come and pay their respects to him. The Queen took the part of her brother and foolishly wrote the Duc d'Orléans an imperious letter, which so offended all three princes that for weeks they remained away from the Court. The Prince de Conti, alleging an attack of gout, was the last to return.

At the time of the *Guerre des Farines* the Prince was thus in a mood hostile both to Turgot and the Court. And the fact that the signal for the riots had been given in Pontoise, where his country house of L'Isle Adam was situated, gave colour to the theory that he was not unconnected with them. Moreover, he was known to have been concerned in the speculations in corn which Turgot's edict had obstructed.

But was there nothing more behind this mysterious *Guerre des Farines* which neither contemporaries nor historians have been able completely to explain? The evident organization of the outbreak, the large sums of money found on the rioters and the prosperity of many of the so-called hunger-marchers, all pointed to some vaster conspiracy than that of a rancorous prince or of disappointed speculators.

The Marquis de Ségur, whilst expressing his opinion that the Prince de Conti was the real instigator, observes that in our day the *Guerre des Farines* has been represented as an attempt by Freemasonry serving as a preface to the French Revolution, but that this conjecture is not supported by convincing proof.

According to the contemporary Abbé Proyart, however, the Prince de Conti was a leading Freemason! Let us see, moreover, whether these conjectures are as unfounded as M. de Ségur states, and also whether they have only been hazarded in our day, long after the event.

It is true that the researches of Père Deschamps, of M.

Gustave Bord, M. Charles d'Héricault, M. Copin-Albancelli, M. André Baron and a number of other writers during the past fifty years have exposed the workings of Freemasonry behind the Revolution in such a way that in France no one seriously disputes the part it played in the overthrow of the monarchy. Indeed, the Freemasons themselves glory in the fact. But this is no discovery of modern times. On the eve of the Revolution the Marquis de Luchet published his prophecy on the dangers of Freemasonry and Illuminism, which was to be so terribly fulfilled. And in 1797 a book appeared, entitled *Le Fléau des Tyrans*, by General Danican, showing the influence of this occult power in the *Guerre des Farines*.

It will be remembered that the Grand Orient, with the Duc de Chartres, the future Philippe Egalité, as Grand Master, had been founded in 1772, that is to say just three years earlier, whilst the Illuminés of France had been in existence since 1762. At the same time, Weishaupt was also bringing his great scheme of world revolution to completion, and, after thinking it out for six years, founded his Bavarian Illuminati on May 1, 1776—a year to a day after the *Guerre des Farines* broke out. It was, therefore, just at this moment that the occult powers were mustering their forces for the great attack on throne and altar.

Was this the mystery known to Louis XVI when, in his letter to the Parlement, he referred to the disturbances of which he 'knew the secret causes'? M. Foncin quotes Weber as saying that the clemency of the King kept him silent with regard to the instigators of sedition, and adds the comment: 'that is to say, the affair was hushed up by order of Louis XVI. He was no doubt afraid of striking too high up and of punishing too many culprits.'

But was it only as princes of the blood that he feared to unveil their manœuvres? Or did he realize the occult power behind them? If so, he showed himself no more cautious than M. Foncin himself who, whilst enumerating all the various factors said to have been behind the troubles—the

Queen, Maurepas, Sartines, Lenoir, the party of Choiseul, the Parlement, the clergy—and dismissing all these hypotheses as absurd, never once mentions the word Freemasonry. Perhaps even more than Louis XVI he realized the danger of affronting that formidable power.

*Le Fléau des Tyrans* contains a chapter on the Freemasons, the Illuminés and the Rose Croix, tracing their origins from the Templars under Jacques du Molay, and another on the administration of Turgot and the Guerre des Farines. But whilst also indicating the Prince de Conti as the prime instigator, General Danican does not hesitate to trace the source of the trouble to the 'Templar-Jacobins.' In his opinion the Guerre des Farines was 'the first rising in arms of these "*grands initiés*,"' whose ultimate object was to set all Europe in flames. The attempt was defeated by the courage and firmness of Louis XVI and Turgot, but it was to be repeated with the same methods, the same organization, fourteen years later, and this time with triumphant success. The Guerre des Farines was, in fact, the rehearsal for the French Revolution.

The coronation of Louis XVI at Reims had been fixed for the 11th of June, only a month after the Guerre des Farines had ended. This solemn ceremony, dating back to the earliest days of the monarchy, at which the kings of France paid homage to God for their crown and sceptre and were anointed with the holy oil, had been postponed owing to the opposition of the philosophers, who saw in it 'an absurd and bizarre ceremony' and a relic of servitude. Turgot himself, imbued with these ideas, had said to the King: 'You would please your people better by announcing to them that you wish to hold your crown only by their love.'

But this opinion had been overruled, and great celebrations were prepared in the ancient cathedral city. Louis XVI, however, held that in view of the ruin caused by the Guerre des Farines, this was no time for lavish display or costly

for centuries because the last kings of France were not married at the time of their coronation. Mercy had hoped that the custom would be revived in the case of Marie Antoinette, but neither she nor Louis XVI seemed to desire it, presumably on account of the additional expense which the King was anxious to avoid.

It was therefore alone in an immense carriage eighteen feet high that Louis XVI made his entry into Reims and received the keys of the city from the Duc de Bourbon, Governor of Champagne. The custom of hanging the streets with tapestries on such occasions had been abandoned. 'I wish,' said Louis XVI, 'that there should be nothing between my people and myself to prevent us seeing each other.' The Queen had arrived the day before with the King's brothers and their wives at one o'clock in the morning and passed through the town, lit up by moonlight, amidst the acclamations of the crowds.

On the morning of the coronation, Sunday, June 11, at six o'clock, the clergy began to take their places in the stalls of the cathedral, followed by the princes of the blood, the peers of the realm, the Field-Marsals and the Ministers. At seven o'clock began the curious old ceremony of fetching the King.

The Bishops of Laon and Beauvais, setting forth in their pontifical robes at the head of the procession and preceded by the Marquis de Dreux Brézé, Grand Master of the Ceremonies, reach the door of the King's chamber, on which the Grand Chorister raps with his stick.

'What is your wish?' says the Grand Chamberlain.

'We wish for the King,' answers the first of the ecclesiastical peers.

'The King sleeps,' says the Grand Chamberlain.

The knocks and the same replies are repeated twice again. When for the third time the Grand Chamberlain has said: 'The King sleeps,' the Bishop replies: 'We ask for Louis XVI, whom God has given us for King.'

Then the doors are opened and the King in his gold and

crimson robes, with his mantle of silver and his velvet cap adorned with plumes and diamonds, is seen lying on his bed of state. After pronouncing a blessing and presenting him with holy water the bishops lead him from the room in procession, chanting prayers as they go.

On arrival at the cathedral comes the sprinkling from the sacred phial (*la sainte ampoule*) handed down from the days of Clovis, followed by the coronation oath. The King takes in his hand the sword of Charlemagne, and having handed it to the Maréchal de Clermont-Tonnerre, prostrates himself before the high altar whilst litanies are sung, then after the seven anointings he is clothed in his robes of purple velvet worked with silver fleur de lys. The ring, signifying his union with his people, is placed on his finger, the golden sceptre set with pearls in his hand, the great gold crown of Charlemagne, adorned with rubies and sapphires and surmounted by a fleur de lys of pearls, is taken from the high altar and placed upon his head. The King is seated on his throne. Then the doors of the cathedral are opened, the people flow in from the steps, clouds of incense rise into the air, in which a number of birds are loosed as symbols of the people's happiness. Outside, the drums are beating, trumpets blowing, guns firing salutes, amidst the cries of *Vive le Roi!* from the assembled multitudes.

The Queen had watched the ceremony from a gallery near the high altar, touched to the heart by the beauty of the ancient ritual and the loyalty of the people; and the King, looking up, saw that tears were streaming from her eyes. When, crowned and sceptred, he mounted the throne her emotion was so great that for a moment she lost consciousness and had to be carried out, but quickly returned to her seat, and the King then looked up again with such deep affection that the congregation too shed tears, and in spite of the sacredness of the place, broke out into rapturous applause.

As the royal procession at last emerged from the cathedral door, enthusiastic crowds closed round the King, who, for-

bidding the guards to keep them at a distance, held out his hands towards them and allowed them to be clasped by the weeping multitude.

Three days later the ancient rite of touching for the 'King's evil,' a custom dating from the time of Clovis, was carried out. Two thousand four hundred victims of scrofula from all over France knelt on either side of a long avenue of trees and the King, moving down their ranks, passed his hand twice over the face of each one, from cheek to cheek, then from forehead to chin, with the words: 'May God heal you; the King touches you.' The Duc de Croy, following close behind him, observed that it needed all the King's courage and fortitude to go through this 'repulsive ceremony' without flinching, and that in spite of the noisome odours, increased by the heat of the day, he never lost his sang-froid, looking at each sufferer 'with attention and a remarkable air of kindness' as if wishing 'to do all he could with his whole heart.' At the end the princes of the blood, in accordance with tradition, brought first vinegar, then water and finally orange flower water wherewith to wash his hands.

To Louis XVI the tears of the Queen had meant more than all the splendour of his coronation; throughout the rest of the day, says Mercy, he spoke of them with a joy he had seldom displayed before, and remained in 'a state of adoration towards her such as it would be impossible to describe.'

In the evening, with the Queen on his arm, he walked for an hour about the gallery leading from the cathedral to the Archbishop's palace amidst cries of 'Long live the King and Queen' from the crowds drawn up on each side of their passage.

'It is certain,' Mercy wrote to Maria Theresa, 'that in the course of this brilliant solemnization which had attracted so many people both from the provinces and from foreign countries, it was the Queen who particularly held the

attention of the public; she showed herself at every moment dignified, kind and gracious, and if the homage paid to her was extraordinary and universal it is also certain that never was homage better deserved.'

Marie Antoinette herself wrote with deep contentment to her mother:

'The coronation was perfect in every way, it seems that everyone was delighted with the King and he must be as much so with his subjects: great and small all wished him well, the ceremonies of the Church were interrupted at the moment of the crowning by the most touching acclamations. I could not keep up, my tears flowed in spite of myself and met with gratitude. . . . It is an astonishing and at the same time a happy thing to be so well received two months after the revolt and in spite of the dearness of bread, which unfortunately still continues. And it is a prodigious thing in the French character to let oneself be carried away by evil suggestions and then to return immediately to a right mind. Surely when we see the people treat us so well whilst they are in distress we are all the more obliged to work for their happiness' <sup>1</sup>

Louis XVI, in a letter to Maurepas, who had not been able to attend the ceremony, showed that he had indeed been profoundly impressed by the conviction that he must show himself worthy of the ovation he had received. 'I am sorry,' he wrote from Reims, 'that you could not share with me the satisfaction I have felt here. It is very right that I should labour to make a people happy who contribute so much to my happiness; I am now going to give myself up to this entirely. I hope you have thought over the measures we talked about together; I thought about them on my part as much as I could amidst the crowd of ceremonies. The need is great, but with courage and your counsels I count on going through with it.' <sup>2</sup>

In this mood of hope and gratitude the King returned to Versailles.

<sup>1</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, II 343

<sup>2</sup> *Journal de Véri*, I 306.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE REIGN OF VIRTUE

THE King's popularity was further increased this July of 1775 by the appointment of Malesherbes as Minister of the Interior. The Duc de la Vrillière, brother-in-law of Maurepas, who had held the post until now, was the only member of Louis XV's Ministry to survive the clean sweep of August 24, 1774. Old, discredited by the baseness of his character, still more frivolous than Maurepas and without his ability, he had been retained so long only because of his knowledge of ceremonial which, it was thought, would prove useful during the coronation. But now he had served his purpose and even Maurepas recognized that he must go.

Marie Antoinette, influenced by the Choiseul party, would have liked him to be replaced by Sartines, and at first showed some annoyance at the rejection of her candidate, but she was quickly won over by the arguments of Maurepas, Turgot and Mercy, and ended by accepting Malesherbes with good-humour.

Chrétien Guillaume de Lamoignon de Malesherbes, born in 1721, had been a councillor in the Parlement, director of the State library and President of the Cour des Aides (Department for benevolence levied by the State) under Louis XV, to whom he had addressed remonstrances in 1770 and 1771 against further taxation and in defence of the Parlements. On the suppression of these bodies in 1771 the Cour des Aides had been done away with but was re-established on their recall in November 1774, and Malesherbes resumed his post as First President of the Cour des Aides. In this capacity he was able to bring powerful support to Turgot's reforms. During the *Guerre des Farines*



he had presented fresh remonstrances to Louis XVI on the abuse of the *gabelle* (salt tax) and the tyranny of the Farmers General. Above all he asked for the reform of taxation in all its departments, and with the co-operation of Turgot made a report which was presented to the King. On the 30th of May Malesherbes himself was received in private audience by Louis XVI who, having studied the report, said to him :

‘You cannot expect me to give a detailed answer on every point. I shall concern myself with making the necessary reforms in their order and in every matter which is capable of reform. But this will not be the work of a moment, it will be the work of my whole reign.’<sup>1</sup>

Far more than his Ministers the young King realized the time it must take to remedy such vast abuses, and if he erred by too great deliberation, they erred by precipitation and the mistaken idea that everything could be done at once. In the end, as we shall see, all was lost by the latter.

Louis XVI, however, had formed a most favourable opinion of Malesherbes and had no hesitation in acceding to Turgot’s wish that he should be called to the Ministry in July 1775. No more popular choice could have been made. A man of known integrity, he had won almost universal respect; only by some of the courtiers and the less liberal-minded clergy was he regarded with aversion. The best friend of Turgot, he added to Turgot’s solid qualities a personal charm that the farouche Comptroller General lacked. Though short and thick-set, of undistinguished appearance, his bright intelligent eyes, brilliant smile and gay simplicity of manner attracted where Turgot repelled. With these two men at the helm it seemed indeed as if France was entering on the Golden Age so long awaited, and in salons so diverse in character as those of Mme du Deffand and Julie de Lespinasse the ‘reign of virtue’ was hailed with rapture.

This enthusiasm was shared by foreigners as well; Mercy,

<sup>1</sup> Foncin, *op cit.*, p. 222.

Maria Theresa, and even Frederick the Great were loud in their praises of the choice of Ministers made by the young King. Horace Walpole, that autumn in Paris, wrote in the same strain on October 3, 1775:

‘Messieurs Turgot and Malesherbes are every day framing plans for mitigating monarchy and relieving the people; and the King not only listens to but encourages them.’

Again on October 10:

‘This country is far more happy [than England]. It is governed by benevolent and beneficent men under a prince who has not yet betrayed a fault, and who will be as happy as his people if he always employs such men. MM. Turgot and Malesherbes are philosophers in the true sense, that is legislators, but as their plans tend to serve the public, you may be sure they do not please interested individuals.’

The appointment of Malesherbes came at an opportune moment for Turgot, who counted on his support in the matter of religious liberty. The assembly of the clergy, which met every five years to decide what voluntary donations should be made to the royal Treasury, began its sittings in July of this year, and continued until December. It was now that the rift in the Church became most apparent, for the two parties of ‘evangelists’ and ‘politicians’ were sharply divided on the question of Protestant emancipation.

But here again the issues at stake were not as clear as they might appear to the modern mind, by which freedom of conscience has come to be regarded as a measure of justice admitting of no dispute. Turgot and Malesherbes, backed by the philosophers and Encyclopédistes, were also for freedom of conscience, but it was suspected in orthodox quarters that their advocacy of this cause went further than according liberty to the Protestants to practise their religion, and opened the door to free-thinking and atheism. The atheists indeed, says Soulavie, were Turgot’s most ardent supporters. The orthodox clergy again emphasized the danger of allowing writers to attack religion with impunity, ‘to instil poison

into all classes of society' and to undermine morality.<sup>1</sup> They also urged the King to check the spread of Freemasonry, which was now enrolling even women amongst its adepts. But whilst advocating these salutary measures the 'evangelists' went to the further extreme of inveighing against any toleration shown towards the Protestants and, headed by Christophe de Beaumont, Archbishop of Paris, urged fresh legislation reviving all the restrictions placed on them since the time of François I; the work of Louis XIV in revoking the Edict of Nantes, they held, should be continued.

Thus, as in all the problems set before Louis XVI, there was the *pour* and the *contre*; much was to be said for both sides, and much against. There was no clear question of right or wrong on either. The King, fervent Catholic though he was, recoiled from any measures of oppression and, as his appointment of Necker showed later on, dissented from the view that a Protestant should not be admitted to any office of State. Left to himself it seems probable that he would have accorded liberty to the Protestants at this juncture instead of twelve years later. But faced by a formidable opposition he took refuge in non-committal injunctions to the bishops to set a good example in their dioceses and to revive faith by the practice of virtues. The assembly, whilst voting a larger sum than they had intended—sixteen million livres—broke up in a mood of general dissatisfaction.

Meanwhile, Malesherbes had been engaged on the important question of prison reform. Immediately after his appointment as Minister of the Interior he ordered a minute enquiry to be made throughout all the prisons of France in order to discover cases of arbitrary or unjust imprisonment. It was said that only two such cases could be found. Nevertheless the state of the prisons left much to be desired. Malesherbes created a precedent by going himself to the Bastille and visiting the rooms, but here as we know, largely through the researches of M. Funck-Brentano, the King's

<sup>1</sup> Ségur, *Au Couchant*, 1 260.

guests were lodged in comparative comfort. Known as the 'best hotel for men of letters,' the Bastille, far from being the place of horror depicted by romancers, was mainly a place of detention for State prisoners and particularly for seditious authors. The rooms they occupied were all provided with either fire-places or stoves, a bed with green serge curtains, a straw mattress with three coverlets, two tables, two or three chairs, sometimes an old armchair.

The Abbé Morellet, who in 1760 received a *lettre de cachet* for a satirical allusion to Mme de Robecq, beloved of the Duc de Choiseul, describes his imprisonment at the Bastille in the most light-hearted manner: 'The two months I spent in that solitude passed—and I laugh still as I write this—very agreeably for me.'

Moreover, the prisoners were not all kept in solitude. There was a library from which they could borrow books; after a time they were allowed to have ink and paper, to walk in the garden, to see their friends and visit each other in their rooms. Their health and even their tastes were considered. Indeed, in the régime of the Bastille there seems to have been an element of Gilbert and Sullivan comedy, in which the victim is condemned by a brutal despot to be hurried away to a damp, dark dock, and the next moment comes up smiling, none the worse for the experience. Thus M. Funck-Brentano tells us of a prisoner who declared he had been chained hand and foot in a dungeon, but the archives of the Bastille show its officials scouring Paris for a blue dressing-gown with red stripes which he demands with so much insistence that the commissioner loses patience and complains that he has tried no less than twelve shops in vain, and sees no reason why he should be put to so much trouble in order 'to satisfy the fantastic demands of the prisoner.' This man was no aristocrat, but because he suffers from rheumatism 'he is provided with dressing-gowns lined with rabbits' fur, vests lined with silk plush, wadded gloves and caps and fine breeches in thick leather.'<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Funck-Brentano, *Légendes et Archives de la Bastille* (1898), pp. 183, 184.

As to the food at the Bastille some of the menus recorded by the prisoners are enough to make a gourmet's mouth water: 'green pea soup garnished with lettuce and the quarter of a fowl on the top . . . a succulent slice of beef with gravy and a crown of parsley . . . forcemeat pie well trimmed with sweet-bread, cocks' crests, asparagus, mushrooms, truffles . . . a ragout of tongue,' ending up with biscuits and apples for dessert and washed down with excellent Burgundy.<sup>1</sup>

All this was under Louis XIV, and the same régime continued under Louis XV.

From the beginning of the eighteenth century, says M. Funck-Brentano, chains and dungeons were only made use of as temporary punishments for insubordinate prisoners; after the accession of Louis XVI they were not employed at all. Malesherbes introduced further reforms after his inspection of the prisons in August 1775, and went carefully into the question of those who were wrongfully detained. He did not, however, see fit to release Le Prévôt de Beaumont, author of the revelations on what was to be known as the Pacte de Famine, who was regarded as a dangerous lunatic. Malesherbes himself agreed that 'his head was not very sound,' and he was eventually transferred to a mental home.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, in other prisons, notably Bicêtre, where common malefactors were incarcerated, conditions were horrible—as indeed they were everywhere at that date. The prisoners were herded into huge rooms, a hundred together, without air or light, and fell victims to frequent epidemics of disease. The same thing happened in England, where prison-fever raged and the judges were provided with bunches of herbs which were supposed to ward off infection. As to the convict ships on which men were transported to Botany Bay for trifling offences, no words could describe their horror

Malesherbes, however, resolved to clean up the prisons of France, make them healthier and set the prisoners on to

<sup>1</sup> Funck-Brentano, *Légendes et Archives de la Bastille* (1898), p. 69

<sup>2</sup> Edmond Buré, *Légendes Révolutionnaires* (1895), p. 36

work of public utility; he does not, however, seem to have accomplished a great deal, for it was not until 1780, long after his Ministry had ended, that prison reform was carried out in earnest

His next concern was *lettres de cachet*, which he did not propose to abolish but only to render less arbitrary by instituting a committee of magistrates to prevent their misuse.

Besides the prisoners there was one class of the community whose condition demanded still more instant attention. These were the sick. It is curious to find that amongst the many humanitarian schemes of Turgot and Malesherbes hospital reform seems to have played no part. It is true that M. Foncin, Turgot's panegyrist, records with pride his hero's contributions to medical science in founding courses of anatomy, professorial chairs, in buying remedies for certain diseases, but beyond instituting an hospice with six beds for serious surgical cases, neither he nor Malesherbes seem to have occupied themselves with the importance of making better provision for the sick of Paris.

Unfortunately, one appointment had been made to the Ministry which proved less happy than that of Malesherbes. On October 10, 1775, the Maréchal de Mury, Minister for War, had died under an operation for stone, and on the advice of Turgot and Malesherbes the Comte de Saint-Germain was chosen to succeed him.

Claude Louis, Comte de Saint-Germain, born in 1707, had in his youth served for a short time under the Elector Palatine and then under Frederick the Great, but had afterwards passed into the service of the Maréchal de Saxe and distinguished himself in the battles of Raucoux and Lauffeld and in the Seven Years' War. After a quarrel with the Maréchal de Belle-Isle he had undertaken the reorganization of the army in Denmark, but disturbances in that country had driven him to give up the career of arms, so, beating his sword into a ploughshare, he retired to a family estate at Lauterbach in Alsace, where he occupied himself with

farming, and employed his leisure in writing memoirs on military affairs which he sent to Maurepas. These, combined with his varied experience in different armies, led the old Minister to consider him worthy of attention as the man to restore the status of the French army. The same idea had occurred to Malesherbes, who discussed it with Turgot, and the proposition was finally put before the King, who agreed on the ground that he belonged to no party. The Queen, who would have preferred the Marquis de Castries, made, however, no objection when consulted. Accordingly a messenger was sent to Lauterbach, where he found the old General in an overcoat and night-cap feeding his chickens in the farmyard. As soon as he had recovered from his surprise at hearing that he was still remembered at the Court of France, Saint-Germain, accompanied by a solitary peasant, set forth for Fontainebleau. On the day following his arrival, October 26, he was received in audience by the King and assumed his post as Minister for War.

Louis Blanc, on the authority of Soulavie, says that the nomination of Saint-Germain was secretly due to Masonic influences working through the Illuminati of Germany—then just in process of formation—and the personal intrigues of one of their number, the Baron von Blecken, the agent of the Duke of Brunswick.<sup>1</sup>

According to this theory Saint-Germain's work was to consist in disaffecting the King's army by introducing the brutal methods of punishment practised in Prussia under Frederick the Great. Whether this was Saint-Germain's premeditated idea or not, it was certainly what he succeeded in doing. The introduction of blows struck with the flat of the sword infuriated the French soldiers; 'Strike with the point, that hurts less!' one of them was heard to retort angrily when hit in this manner. But the most disintegrating measure adopted by Saint-Germain was contained in the edict of December 15, 1775, relating to the Household troops, by which two companies of musketeers, famous for their

<sup>1</sup> Louis Blanc, *Histoire de la Révolution Française*, II. 38; Soulavie, III. 55.

past record of valour in the wars of Louis XIV and Louis XV and selected from the best families in the kingdom, were done away with, thus alienating some of the King's most loyal supporters. At the same time the Light Horse, the mounted Grenadiers and the gendarmerie were reduced and a number of supernumeraries—standard-bearers, trumpeters, etc.—discharged.

The King had consented to all this in the interests of economy, and the Queen with strange blindness gave it her approval, apparently with the sentimental idea of introducing to the Court of Versailles the simpler customs of the Court of Vienna, where the princes of the House of Austria were surrounded only by a few faithful retainers. In the end the cause of economy profited but little, for the pensions required to compensate those who had been deprived of their posts laid a heavy charge on the finances of the Government and contributed still further to the deficit.

Meanwhile Turgot was pushing on with his reforms, and by the New Year of 1776 had prepared his famous six edicts, of which the first two only need concern us; the others related to matters of minor or local importance. Number one, advocating the abolition of the *corvée*, was his first great attempt to do away with the unjust inequality of taxation that had fallen hitherto on those least able to bear it.

The *corvée*, which went back to the feudal system, had not been unreasonable in the old days when the vassals constructed roads for their seigneurs in return for their lands; it was in fact simply rent paid in the form of labour. But under Louis XIV it had become a means of the most fearful oppression; the peasants never knew when they would be torn from their fields and forced to spend weeks or months working for the Government without payment or compensation for their neglected crops. The *corvée* had thus 'become the terror of the countryside,' comparable only to the press-gangs of England at the same date, but with a civil instead of a naval purpose.



Turgot now demanded that forced labour on the roads should be entirely abolished and replaced by a tax for their upkeep, which should fall on the landowners, for, he argued, 'it is to the owners of property that the roads are most useful, by the advantages of multiplied means of communication, for conveying the products of their lands. . . . It is therefore the owners of property only who should take the lead in the construction of roads, since they derive the benefit of them.'<sup>1</sup>

The tax, however, was not to fall on the 'privileged classes' alone, but on all landowners. The clause published in the name of the King, who gave it his heartiest approval, was quite explicit on this point: 'This contribution having for its object an expense useful to all owners of property, we wish that all owners of property, whether privileged or not, shall contribute to it in the same way as is customary with regard to local charges,' and in order to set the example, the King went on to say: 'We do not mean that even the lands of our domain shall be exempt, whether in our hands or when they have passed out of them.'<sup>2</sup>

By these words Louis XVI therefore definitely abolished forced labour in his domains, and he waited for all owners of property to follow his lead in the matter.

It would greatly simplify the writing of history were one to adopt the method of Carlyle and construct a theory into which all events are made to fit neatly. For according to Carlyle there are only two parties to the disputes that arose throughout the Revolution, the Court and the privileged classes on one hand, the people on the other. So he writes with regard to this reform of Turgot's: 'On the very threshold of the business, he proposes that the clergy, the Noblesse, the very Parlements be subjected to taxes like the People! One shriek of indignation and astonishment reverberates through all the Château galleries . . . the poor King . . . must now write a dismissal and let the French Revolution accomplish itself, pacifically or not, as it can.'

<sup>1</sup> Foncin, *op. cit.*, p. 380

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 381, Lire, *Journal d'un Bourgeois de Paris*, 1 210.

But Turgot's dismissal three months later had nothing to do with the edict on taxation, nor was it through the château galleries that the shriek of indignation against it reverberated most loudly; the château at this moment was much more concerned about Saint-Germain's so-called 'reforms.' The Queen, writes Mercy on January 19, was deeply grieved for all the people who had lost their posts and she would like to help in compensating them from her private purse; all that we find in the correspondence of Mercy, Marie Antoinette and Maria Theresa about the reforms of Turgot in 1775, is a passage in a letter from Marie Antoinette to her mother on February 27, in which she says: 'The King has made edicts which will cause perhaps fresh trouble with the Parlement; I hope it will not go as far as in the last reign and that the King will maintain his authority.'<sup>1</sup>

It is true, however, that a storm of opposition against the edict on the *corvée* arose throughout the capital and the kingdom; when, indeed, in the history of the world has any class of people willingly submitted to taxation? Louis XVI, in an annotation to one of Turgot's later schemes, pointed out that: 'The Abbé Terray clearly found that one is never sure of carrying a tax into effect except when it is to be imposed by the party that pays no part of it or a very small part of it.' But it was the Parlement, mentioned by Carlyle as a sort of afterthought, the Parlement recalled by Louis XVI in deference to the people's wishes, which provided the great obstacle to this first reform in taxation concerted between Louis XVI and Turgot. Carlyle has not a word to say about the King's tenacity and courage, which carried his Minister triumphantly through the crisis. Let us see what really happened.

On January 6, 1776, the King signed the first of Turgot's six edicts, namely the one relating to the abolition of the *corvée* and its replacement by a tax on owners of property. A shriek then *did* go up, from the Parlement of Paris, headed

<sup>1</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, II 425.

by that old enemy of the Court, the Prince de Conti. It was this infamous personage, who had been the soul of the agitation for the recall of the Parlements and who was suspected on account of his speculations in corn of being behind the *Guerre des Farines*, who now became the soul of the resistance to the edict on the *corvée*. It was his party which advanced the monstrous axiom that 'all public charges should fall on the common people [*roturiers*] who, by their standing, are born *taillables* and *corvéables*'—i.e. taxable—'at will, whilst the nobles on the contrary are born exempt from all taxation.' 'This,' adds M. Foncin, 'is the real idea of the majority in the Parlement.'<sup>1</sup> Such were the rulers the people had given themselves in clamouring for the return of the bodies exiled by Maupeou! It will be seen that the situation was not quite as simple as Carlyle would have us believe.

Another determined opponent to the edict was found in the person of Maupeou's successor, Hue de Miromesnil, who wrote a violent memoir addressed to Turgot. The King read this, took the side of Turgot, and the Chancellor had no more to say.

The second of the six edicts related to the corporations of employers of labour, known as *jurandes* and *maîtrises*, which invested these bodies with the monopoly of the various industries and prevented workers from entering them until they had acquired the skill necessary to satisfy the conditions imposed by the masters. Turgot now demanded that everyone should be free to work at whatever trade he pleased and that industry should be freed from the shackles of the corporations. But his edict went further than this, for it also forbade all coalitions of workers, such as are known to-day as trade-unions, in a clause that stated: 'We forbid all masters, companions, workmen and apprentices to form any association or assembly amongst themselves under any pretext whatever.' This despotic measure, coming so oddly from the pen of a reformer and champion of 'liberty,' was,

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 378.

as I have shown elsewhere, again passed by the revolutionaries in 1791 under the name of the *Loi Chapelier*.<sup>1</sup>

On February 9, 1776, the six edicts, approved by the King and his Council, were placed before the Parlement of Paris. It seems to have been then that Louis XVI, deeply discouraged by its attitude towards reforms, is said to have uttered with a sigh the famous remark: 'Il n'y a que M. Turgot et moi qui aimions le peuple!' But, according to the Abbé de Véri, it was a workman employed by the King in working his lathe who said to him: 'Sire, je ne vois ici que vous et M. Turgot qui soient amis du peuple.' The King repeated this to the Queen, who passed it round.<sup>2</sup>

The Parlement, having sat for a week on the edicts, assembled again on the 17th to announce its decisions. The Prince de Conti, though prematurely old and now dying, dragged himself to both meetings in order, as Condorcet wrote to Voltaire, 'to try and preserve for France the happiness of having *corvées* and to establish the great principle that the people by their nature are taxable.' His opposition to the suppression of the *jurandes* was no less determined, since by this he lost the benefit of the freedom of the Temple (his house in Paris) and 50,000 livres of income.

The outcome of this meeting of the Parlement on February 17 was a foregone conclusion: the edicts on the *corvée* and on the *maîtrises* and *jurandes*, as well as three minor ones out of the six, were rejected by an immense majority, and it was resolved to draw up remonstrances for presentation to the King.

But still Louis XVI did not weaken. After reading the document placed before him on the 4th of March, he said: 'I have read the remonstrances of my Parlement. They contain nothing that was not foreseen and fully considered.' He added that the object of the edicts was to relieve those of his subjects who subsisted by the labour of their hands and who were most in need; that, as to the *corvée*, every loyal subject ought to show himself eager to pay the tax substi-

<sup>1</sup> My *French Revolution*, p. 185

<sup>2</sup> *Journal de Véri*, 1. 406.

tuted in its place since he himself had been the first to pay it on the lands of the crown, and that now he had taken pains to develop his reasons for persisting in his resolution, he hoped that his Parlement would no longer defer their enrolment of his edicts.<sup>1</sup>

The Parlement, interpreting the fact that the King had seen fit to enter into explanations as a sign of yielding, continued the dispute; thereupon the King summoned a *lit de justice* on March 12.

The debate that took place on this occasion was long and stormy. The Prince de Conti, who had to be carried into the hall, was, however, not too sick to enter into a violent altercation with the Duc de Choiseul, who supported the edicts, and the two having actually come to blows had to be separated. By a strange anomaly Miromesnil, who opposed the edicts, was obliged in his official capacity as Garde des Sceaux to set forth the King's excellent reasons for ordering them in the most convincing manner; the President Aligre of the Parlement replied by a harrowing description of the disasters they must inevitably bring upon France. The Attorney-General then took up the theme. For five hours Louis XVI, looking around him at the grave faces of the magistrates, was obliged to hear himself remonstrated with as a tyrant and oppressor crushing the landed proprietors of the kingdom beneath a burden of taxation.

The King, however, still held his ground. The edicts must be enrolled. This done, he made his speech:

'You have heard,' he said, 'the edicts that my love for my subjects has induced me to issue. I intend them to be obeyed. . . . I wish only to reign by justice and the law. If experience makes it appear that there are drawbacks in any of the provisions these edicts contain, I shall take care to remedy them.'<sup>2</sup>

The great duel between the King and the Parlement thus came to an end—for the time being. The triumph of Turgot

<sup>1</sup> *Journal de Vén*, p 419

Ségur, *Au Couchant*, 1 287.

seemed complete. A burst of popular rejoicing greeted the victory.

If only Turgot had known how to follow up this victory with other measures as sound as the edict on the *corvée*! A great step had been made towards the removal of that flagrant injustice, the inequality of taxation, but one step only; much more yet remained to be done. Instead of pursuing the course of sane and practical reforms Turgot now went off at a tangent and embarked on schemes that dissipated his energies to little purpose. Louis XVI, at twenty, with, as he believed, a lifetime before him, had said: 'These reforms will not be the work of a moment; they will be the work of my whole reign.' Turgot, at forty-nine, said: 'In my family we die of gout at fifty,' and set himself to accomplish all he could before death claimed him.

The establishment of a *caisse d'escomptes* (discounting bank) on March 24, with the object of reducing interest on loans to 4 per cent. and providing a sum of ten millions to the Treasury, disappointed Turgot's hopes and led only to a revival of the stockjobbing which had proved so disastrous in the time of the Regent.

But Turgot at this moment was engaged on a far greater scheme. It would almost seem as if his triumph in carrying through the six edicts on March 12 had gone to his head, for he now embarked on a gigantic programme for the complete regeneration of France within a year. This programme, in the form of a memoir, was placed before the King, and it was now that Louis XVI, who had stood by Turgot manfully throughout the struggle with the Parlement, began to doubt the ability of the Comptroller General. His comments, written in his own hand on the margins of Turgot's memoir, display a soundness of reasoning and a common-sense far beyond his years.<sup>1</sup>

Turgot's main idea was to replace the old monarchic system by a number of elective assemblies headed by a permanent National Assembly to deal with questions of

<sup>1</sup> Soulavie, iii. 142 and foll.

taxation. To this Louis XVI appended the remark: 'The idea of giving existence to perpetual States General is subversive of the monarchy, which is only absolute because its authority does not admit of a partner.' This might seem autocratic indeed, but in its details Turgot's scheme was not sufficiently democratic to please the King. Thus Turgot stipulated that only landed proprietors possessing an income of six hundred livres should have the right of voting, to which Louis XVI answered that this would be the very way to introduce discontent into the class of non-proprietors. When Turgot declared that the whole plan could be carried out within a year and that 'at the end of a few years your Majesty will have a new people, the first in the universe,' that 'you would be struck on all sides with the spectacle of virtue, disinterestedness, integrity and zeal,' Louis XVI replied: 'I do not know whether France, administered by the representatives of the people, and by her richest inhabitants, would be more virtuous than she is, being administered by those who derive their claim from their birth or the nomination of their sovereign. I find in the series of administrators, nominated by my ancestors, and in the principal families of the law, and even of finance, Frenchmen who would have done honour to any nation of the world. The passage from the established régime to the régime proposed by M. Turgot deserves very critical attention. We see clearly what is, but we see only in imagination what is not, and dangerous enterprises ought not to be undertaken unless one sees whither they will lead.'

The King's opinion on the whole scheme was in fact summed up in the words of another annotation: 'The system of M. Turgot is a beautiful dream, it is the Utopia of an individual, projected by a man who has excellent intentions, but which would overturn the State.'<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, so little can be said in defence of this new departure of Turgot's that M. Foncin omits all mention of it. D'Allonville, who knew Turgot personally, and looked on him with

<sup>1</sup> Soulavie, iii. 148; d'Allonville, i. 80.

the respect he inspired in the youth of his day, says that in later life he looked through the correspondence his father had carried on with Turgot, in which the latter displayed so much folly and vanity that the publishers of his works would never have dared to print it <sup>1</sup>

No one would dispute the uprightness of Turgot, his sincerity and ardour for the public good, but his perpetual contradictions, his tendency to rush into untried schemes, above all his inability to understand human nature, made him a danger at a time when the utmost caution was needed to steer the ship of State. It was this—and not his sane and wise edict on the *corvées*, as Carlyle makes out—that shook the confidence the King had felt in him, and brought about his downfall.

By April 1776 Turgot had made enemies in every quarter. It was not only the noblesse, the clergy, the Parlement, hit by the edict on the *corvée*, who protested against his administration, but those who had supported him in the past now turned against him. For even the wisest measures, when first introduced, may cause upheavals, and the Guerre des Farines had resulted from his legislation on the free circulation of corn. Then the tax laid on the landowners in the place of the *corvée* had the immediate effect of putting up the price of bread. At the same time the abolition of the *jurandes* and *maîtrises* produced industrial troubles; the Paris workers, intoxicated with their new-found liberty, left their workshops with shouts of joy, hired carriages in which they paraded the city, and poured into the cabarets, where they drank till nightfall. The employers, deserted by their hands, were unable to fulfil their contracts and the police were kept busy suppressing drunken outrages in the faubourgs. This state of affairs roused the indignation of the bourgeoisie. A storm of recriminations arose against Turgot; Maurepas ceased to support him, Malesherbes alone remained his friend.

But Malesherbes, courageous as he had been in the past

<sup>1</sup> D'Allonville, 1. 86.



and as he was to show himself in the distant and tragic future, was not of the stuff that endures continued friction, and although he had escaped the obloquy that fell on Turgot, his gentle spirit shrank from the conflict to which the attempt to put his ideals into practice must inevitably lead. His great scheme of economic reform, which included the reduction of the King's household, met with cries of protest from Maurepas. Henceforth his only thought was retreat—to throw up his post and retire from the struggle into which he had never asked to enter. His state of mind, harassed beyond endurance, was that of the King himself. When he tendered his resignation in private audience, Louis XVI, accepting it with profound regret, said sadly: 'You are more fortunate than I am—you can abdicate.'

It was with different feelings that the King parted from Turgot. The Comptroller General had undoubtedly played into the hands of his enemies by his overbearing manner and the high-handed attitude he adopted towards everyone who disagreed with him. He even went so far as to refuse to discuss his financial schemes with the other Ministers. Turgot, in a word, had made himself thoroughly disliked all round.

But the representations of Maurepas, following on the perusal of Turgot's grand scheme for regenerating France in a year and confirming the King's own judgement of Turgot as an unpractical dreamer, would perhaps not have brought about his dismissal had not his enemies resorted to a ruse of the most infamous kind. In collaboration with Ogny, Intendant of the Royal Post Office, personally hostile to Turgot, a number of letters were forged in imitation of his handwriting, full of insults to the King and sarcasms against the Queen. These were put before Louis XVI, who consulted Maurepas, and the *rusé* old Minister was careful not to throw too great doubts on their authenticity. It was now that Marie Antoinette turned against Turgot, and for this and other reasons which will be referred to later, used her influence against him with the King. Pressed on all sides,

Louis XVI at last yielded and dismissed Turgot on the 12th without even according him an interview. In the eyes of many contemporaries and almost all historians, it was the great mistake of his reign. Yet was Louis XVI as mistaken as he has been made to appear? In other words, if Turgot had remained in the Ministry would the Revolution have been averted? Or would it perhaps only have been hastened? Even the Marquis de Ségur, who hardly does justice to Louis XVI, recognizes that Turgot's schemes tended towards the destruction of the aristocracy and to a general levelling down.<sup>1</sup> The King had shown in his annotations to Turgot's memoirs that he understood the danger of withdrawing the supports on which the ancient edifice of the French monarchy rested. M. Poujoulat showed himself fairer to Louis XVI than most French historians when he pointed out that:

'Enough credit has not been paid to a young sovereign for upholding throughout twenty months, for the sake of public welfare, a Minister detested by the Court, by the financiers and by the clergy itself, naturally distrustful of a man so vaunted by the Encyclopaedists.'<sup>2</sup>

Malesherbes himself said at the end of his life:

'M. Turgot and I were very honest men, well educated, ardent for good, who would have thought that any better choice could have been made? Yet we administered very badly; knowing of human nature only through books, lacking skill in business, we allowed the King to be directed by M. de Maurepas, who added all his weakness to that of his pupil, and without wishing it or foreseeing it we contributed by our own ideas to the Revolution.'<sup>3</sup>

Yet whilst recognizing the inability of Louis XVI to take a firmer line at this crisis—and it must be remembered he was still only twenty-two—Malesherbes had formed such an affection for him that, unable to serve him as he would have

<sup>1</sup> *Au Couchant*, 1 365      <sup>2</sup> *Histoire de la Révolution Française* (1848), p. 63

<sup>3</sup> Marquis de Beaucourt, *Captivité et Derniers Moments de Louis XVI* (1892), 1. 289.

wished in the Ministry, he was ready, when the time came, to die for him. Sixteen years later, a month before the fall of the monarchy, Malesherbes, speaking to Bertrand de Moleville of the King, said :

‘He always treated me wonderfully during my Ministry, my chatter sometimes made him laugh. . . . You must have been astonished to notice how much he gains on acquaintance and how wrongly one judges him when one does not know him. I have never met anyone with such right instincts. Have you observed that he is never mistaken as to the right opinion? It is extraordinary. . . . Do you not think that if he had been brought up like all of us and had been helped to conquer that timidity and lack of self-confidence which are his two great faults, one could easily have made a great king of him? And even as he is, I am convinced that with good Ministers his reign would have been one of the happiest and most glorious of our monarchy, because it is impossible to love and wish more than he does for what is right.’<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Bertrand de Moleville, *Mémoires*, II 117



## CHAPTER VII

### LA REINE S'ENNUIE

WHILST reviewing the events that took place after the death of Louis XV and the part played by the young King in affairs of State, the Queen has necessarily been left almost entirely out of the picture. The time has now come to follow the course of her evolution during this period and to explain her conduct in the political crisis that ended 'the reign of virtue' under Turgot and Malesherbes. M. Foncin does not hesitate to declare that 'Marie Antoinette was more responsible than anyone for the dismissal of Turgot'; if this was so and if it is believed that Turgot by remaining in office could have averted the Revolution, then the Queen must be said to have taken her share in the preparation of that final cataclysm. In order to form a judgement on this point we must go back to 1774.

After the death of Louis XV and throughout the rest of that year, Marie Antoinette seems to have changed little from the time when she was the Dauphine. The tendency to 'show her power and let her passions play,' attributed to her by Lord Stormont, can only have been momentary or perhaps mere hearsay, for Mercy, who had better opportunities of observing her conduct at close quarters, complains mainly of her disinclination to use her influence over the King in the sphere of politics. The Queen, he writes on June 7, 1774, is 'somewhat piqued by the fears entertained in Vienna lest she should interfere in affairs of State, she has always been so averse to this by principles and by inclination that she does not understand this anxiety.'<sup>1</sup> Mercy wishes she would interest herself more in these matters so as

<sup>1</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, II. 171.

to win the confidence of the King, who is already disposed to consult her and to trust her native judgement which, as Mercy frequently observed, was excellent and remained so as long as she did not allow herself to be influenced by her surroundings. All the faults he has still to find with her are those that characterized her as Dauphine, the faults of a child, want of application, high spirits, '*dissipation*,' '*légèreté*'—the same words flow perpetually from the pens of Mercy and Maria Theresa. She is still too careless of etiquette, too easily bored with ceremonial, too fond of outdoor exercise, above all, still too fond of riding. To this passion she has added, in July of the same summer, a further enormity; instead of driving out solemnly in a State coach like Marie Leczinska, she has taken to going about in a cabriolet, or small two-wheeled carriage, 'drawn by a single horse which one drives oneself,' a form of conveyance regarded by Mercy as not only dangerous but as 'too common in appearance.'<sup>1</sup>

This is the worst thing she has done so far. There is no question of extravagance in dress, of indulging a taste for jewels or a love of gambling.

'I have found her Majesty very much disposed to avoid all needless or superfluous expense,' writes Mercy at the end of this year, in speaking of her balls. 'The public sees with satisfaction that at a time when economy is so necessary the Sovereigns conform to it in the matter of expense incurred by their pleasures. I am very careful to let it be known that it is owing to the Queen this wise and moderate system has been adopted. Her Majesty is indeed most restrained in this respect and she would never hesitate to give up amusements which she thought might become too expensive and embarrassing [to the finances].'<sup>2</sup>

Still less is there any suggestion in Mercy's letters of coquetry, not one man is mentioned as having gained her favour.

On September 11, 1774, he writes:

'Up to this day, in so far as concerns morals, there has

<sup>1</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, II 208

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, II 270 Letter of December 18, 1774.

not been in the Queen's conduct the slightest thing which does not bear the mark of the most virtuous soul, the most upright and the most rigid with regard to everything pertaining to good character; my reports teem with proofs of this. No one is more deeply convinced of this truth than the King, and it is proved also by daily occurrences. The great and really rare qualities of the Queen are no less well known to the public, by which she is adored with an enthusiasm that has never waned.'<sup>1</sup>

So, up to 1775, the Queen's reputation remains untarnished, she is still the idol of the people, still the young and lovely being of whom Edmund Burke wrote in 1790:

'It is now sixteen or seventeen years since I saw the Queen of France, then the Dauphiness, at Versailles; and surely never lighted on this orb, a more delightful vision. I saw her just above the horizon, decorating and cheering the elevated sphere she just began to move in;—glittering like the morning star, full of life, and splendour, and joy.'

Yet if outwardly the beauty of Marie Antoinette was still unimpaired, the joyousness that had delighted Burke had now given way to moments of intolerable ennui. The buoyancy of youth had helped her to rise above the petty annoyances caused by the soured aunts and jealous sisters-in-law, the lecturings of Mercy and Maria Theresa had failed, more than momentarily, to damp her ardent spirit, but as the years went by the aimlessness of life in this huge château of Versailles, the futile round of Court ceremonies, had become intolerable. Deprived of all the outlets that modern life affords, her young spirit seemed caged in bars of gold. What weary hours were spent in that great bedroom hung with memories, birth chamber of two kings, of thirteen princes and princesses, death chamber of two queens and two dauphines. It was here she slept beneath the canopy of her great bed, sat through the long ceremonial of the toilette, received the Court, endured the tedious ritual of *levers* and

<sup>1</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, II. 232.

*couchers*, and even took her meals, for the dinners taken in public with the King were a matter of form only; the Queen retired to her bedroom afterwards to eat. But most of her time was spent in the little suite of rooms opening out of the state bedchamber, known as the 'Petits Appartements' or the 'Cabinets' of the Queen and containing an anteroom, a tiny salon and two small libraries filled with books chosen by M. Campan. These rooms, though exquisitely decorated and furnished, were sad and sunless, looking out only on to a dark and narrow courtyard from which little light or air could penetrate. Surrounding the sofa in the salon may still be seen the mirrors which are said to have startled the Queen when she first perceived the optical illusion they present. For, when standing in a certain position so that one is reflected in the angle where the plates of glass meet, one has only to raise one's arms and extend them horizontally in order to see oneself without a head. In this room, haunted by so gruesome a presage, Marie Antoinette spent lonely hours or received her *intimes*, surrounded by baskets of wool for her tapestry work, her harp, her harpsichord and little tables laden with music scores. But her passion for flowers brought a note of warmth and colour into the greyness of these surroundings, and from innumerable vases of Chinese or Sèvres porcelain, of crystal or Venetian glass was wafted the scent of roses and lilac from the gardens of Trianon.

Books seem to have played little part in the scheme of Marie Antoinette's life, and M. Campan's collection of exquisitely bound volumes remained peacefully in their shelves. In a much quoted passage from the *Mémoires* of the Baron de Besenval it is said that 'except for a few novels she never opened a book.' The authenticity of these *Mémoires* is, however, more than doubtful; according to Mme de Genlis they were fabricated by that most frivolous personage, the Vicomte de Ségur, out of a few notes left by Besenval, and this view finds confirmation in the protest issued against their publication by two members of the



Besenal family in 1805.<sup>1</sup> Mercy makes a directly opposite statement with regard to Marie Antoinette's choice of literature whilst still the Dauphine. Although her daily readings with the Abbé de Vermond are carried out more from duty than inclination, Mercy reports that she is beginning to like them, 'and if she does not always prefer serious books, at least she chooses them with taste and in such a way as to form the mind. These are well-written letters, historical anecdotes, sometimes dramatic works, never novels or other frivolous books about which her Royal Highness shows no curiosity.'<sup>2</sup>

It is nevertheless evident that Marie Antoinette was not what is called 'intellectual'; like many people who are fond of music she had no innate love for books; nowhere in her letters do we find any references to her favourite authors, nor during the troubled years of her life does she seem often to have found consolation in reading. This is not to say she was lacking in intelligence or depth of character; thousands of good and charming men and women who have done untold good in the world, who have distinguished themselves on their own lines and even achieved greatness, have not been literary; to them the book of life supplies the mental stimulus they need. Marie Antoinette was essentially a woman who lived in the present moment, who liked realities—gardens, animals, children, the people around her, beauty in every form, these were the things that appealed to her and aroused, now her sympathy, now her gaiety and sense of humour.

And at this stage of her life she was still so young! At nineteen one craves for change and movement, but here was neither. 'There is such a uniformity in the way the Queen spends her time here,' Mercy writes on August 15, 1774, 'that there is not the slightest difference between one day and another.'<sup>3</sup> Added to this monotony was the lack

<sup>1</sup> Maurice Tournoux, *Bibliographie de la Révolution Française* (1906),

iv 48

<sup>2</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, 1. 265

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, ii. 218.

of human affection, of warm living emotions such as her eager heart desired. She longed for real friends, for love and sympathy, but above all she longed for children.

It is unnecessary to enter into minute medical details on the obstacle which so long deprived Marie Antoinette of the joy of motherhood. Suffice it to say that at the end of seven years her marriage had still not been consummated owing to a physical inhibition on the part of Louis XVI which, it was believed, a slight operation might cure. To trace the King's inferiority complex solely to this cause after the Freudian manner is, as has been shown already, contrary to all evidence, since this complex existed long before his marriage and continued after the disability in question had been removed. Never did Louis XVI display more self-confidence than during the *Guerre des Farines* whilst his marriage still remained unconsummated, never less than during the Revolution when he had become the father of a family. Moreover, one cause to which his inferiority complex has been traced was the fact that he felt himself less brilliant than his brother the Comte de Provence. But the Comte de Provence suffered from the same sexual disability and certainly not from any inferiority complex. This peculiarity could not, therefore, be said to provide the key to the King's character; all that it seems to have done was to increase the embarrassment Louis XVI felt in the presence of his wife and his anxiety to make up to her for his ineffectualness as a husband by indulging her in every way.

From the outset, as Dauphin, Louis XVI had felt himself, apart from these considerations, inferior to Marie Antoinette. It must be remembered that at the time of his marriage he was only fifteen, an awkward boy who had outgrown his strength, and the high-spirited child he was now to call his wife filled him with a paralysing shyness. Too young to love, he admired her nevertheless, but at the same time he stood in awe of her. After that first formal embrace in the forest of Compiègne, where the royal family received the young Archduchess on her arrival, he took little notice of

her and remained apparently indifferent to her charms. Although as a matter of form he took his place nightly in the Dauphine's state bed, it was only to turn over and go to sleep at once.<sup>1</sup> After all, they were both of them mere children of an age when eyes close directly the head touches the pillow, especially, as in the case of the Dauphin, after days spent in the open air. The Dauphine likewise probably did not long remain awake.

Mercy relates that one day in October 1770, just before the Dauphin's sixteenth birthday, Louis XV questioned him on his coldness to his wife; the Dauphin replied that he found the Archduchess charming, that he liked her, but that it would take him some time to overcome his timidity.<sup>2</sup> It seems probable that he never did entirely overcome it; her poise and dignity, her ready wit and presence of mind made him the more conscious of his own awkwardness and inability to say the right thing at the right moment. Beside her Dresden china elegance he felt himself to be earthenware.

Unhappily there were people only too ready to profit by this state of things. Frederick the Great had no desire to see the hated Franco-Austrian alliance further cemented by the birth of a semi-Austrian Dauphin, and wrote with satisfaction to his ambassador, von der Goltz, saying he has heard the coldness between the royal pair is complete.<sup>3</sup> The Comte de Provence, as the heir-apparent, also hoped that no son of Marie Antoinette would come to stand between him and the throne; later it was said that the Duc d'Orléans was anxious to prevent either brother from having children. Whoever was concerned, intrigues undoubtedly played their part in the matter. 'Everything was done,' says Mme Campan, 'to keep up and increase the coldness the Dauphin showed so long to his young wife,' and she indicates the Duc de la Vauguyon in this connection.

It seems, however, that beneath this apparent coldness there lingered a spark of real affection in the heart of the

<sup>1</sup> Campan, p 76

<sup>2</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, 1 78

<sup>3</sup> Flammermont, *Correspondances Diplomatiques*, p 99.

Dauphin which awakened a response in Marie Antoinette. This is not to say that she ever fell 'in love' with him; Louis XVI was not the man to inspire a romantic passion; but later on, when her marriage had been duly consummated, there can be no doubt that she came to care for him with great devotion, and that even during those first difficult years of estrangement her warm young heart went out to him at moments. Mercy records that once, a year after their marriage, she threw herself into his arms exclaiming: 'I feel, my dear husband, that every day I love you more. Your goodness and your frank nature charm me, and the more I compare you with other people the more I feel how much better you are worth than they.'<sup>1</sup> Again, two years later, Mercy relates that the Dauphin, for once overcoming his constraint, 'kissed her saying: "Do you love me well?" "Yes," she answered, "you need not doubt it, I love you sincerely and I respect you still more." The young Prince seemed deeply touched by this and caressed the Archduchess fondly.'<sup>2</sup>

In the following year, after the accession of Louis XVI to the throne, Mercy goes so far as to say that neither the jealousy of the royal family nor the cabals of Ministers 'can change the King's attitude towards the Queen,' that 'he is in love with her to the full extent of the term and adds esteem to this sentiment (Il en est amoureux dans toute l'étendue du terme et il joint à ce sentiment celui de l'estime).'<sup>3</sup> Again, in the passage already quoted, Mercy had spoken of the King's adoration for the Queen at the time of the coronation.

Mme Campan also describes a moment such as this. After the death of Louis XV the King showed great affection for the Queen, and walked with her on his arm about the gardens at Choisy with such an air of gallantry that the courtiers felt themselves obliged to imitate the royal pair,

<sup>1</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, I 254. Letter of December 19, 1771.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, II 75. Letter of November 12, 1773.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, II 245. Letter of October 7, 1774.

and husbands and wives, fearfully bored in each other's company, paraded the terrace arm-in-arm for hours at a time, 'enduring, by way of flattery, these endless tête-à-têtes.' <sup>1</sup>

But these displays of feeling were rare; in between, the King, absorbed in affairs of State or working off his physical energy hunting or hammering at his anvil, seemed to have relapsed into indifference, and Marie Antoinette was left to bear the grief that gnawed at her heart and cost her in secret many bitter tears.

It is again unnecessary in her case to resort to Freudian methods of psycho-analysis in order to understand her state of mind. Her feelings were really quite simple. For however much the unnatural conditions of her marriage may, and indeed must, have reacted on her nervous system, the dominating thought that emerges from her letters and from those of Mercy to Maria Theresa is her great longing for children. Even as Dauphine, when only fourteen, she had asked for a certain lady's-maid because this woman had a pretty and lively child of four, and she would like to have her near her, writes Mercy, 'owing to the passion she has for children.' <sup>2</sup> She loved to watch them, to play with them and to collect round her any belonging to members of her household. On Sundays, when the garden of the Petit Trianon was thrown open to the public, the Queen would go amongst the family parties collected there and call for the children to be brought up and presented to her, then she would ask their names, and shower on them bonbons and kisses. Once, in a moment of uncontrollable longing, she had adopted a small peasant boy, driven him home in her carriage, seated him at her table and played sadly for a while at being a mother. The boy, brought up under her care, became later one of the most sanguinary Terrorists.

But beyond this natural trouble of a woman was the sorrow of a Queen who had given no heir to the throne. The letters of Maria Theresa, urging on her the necessity for

<sup>1</sup> *Mémoires*, p. 92

<sup>2</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, 1 36.

fulfilling her destiny as mother of a Dauphin, must have felt like turning a knife in a wound, for the Empress showed little human sympathy or understanding for her daughter's unhappy position, and seems to have offered no practical advice that would have helped to put matters right.

In answer to Maria Theresa's cruel observation that the fecundity of the Comtesse d'Artois will gain for *her* the affection of the nation,<sup>1</sup> Marie Antoinette answers sadly: 'It is not my fault if I have not this merit.'<sup>2</sup> And after announcing the birth of her sister-in-law's first child, she adds: 'I was with her all the time in her room: it is unnecessary to tell my dear mother how much I suffered at seeing an heir to whom I had not given birth (*qui n'est pas de moi*).'<sup>3</sup> It is easy to imagine the envy that consumed her at the sight of this apathetic soulless little creature receiving the supreme gift of children for which she herself craved so ardently; yet it was an envy wholly unmixed with rancour; 'her bearing was perfect,' says Mme Campan, 'she showed the young mother every possible mark of tenderness' throughout her accouchement, and, after it was over, 'passed up the stairs and through the Salle des Gardes with the calmest demeanour in the midst of an immense crowd. The *poissardes*, who had arrogated to themselves the right of speaking to their sovereigns in their coarse and ridiculous language, followed her to the door of her rooms crying out with the most licentious expressions that it was for her to give heirs to the throne.'<sup>4</sup> At this her sang-froid deserted her, and hurrying into her apartments she shut herself up to weep.

Is it any wonder if she raged at these unjust reproaches, raged at the fate that had placed her in this cruel predicament, that at moments her affection for Louis XVI gave way to exasperation at his failure to give her, not only the happiness of motherhood, but the status that belonged to her by right as mother of the 'Enfants de France'? Meanwhile the days passed empty, aimless as before.

<sup>1</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, II. 451

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, II 366

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, II 454.

<sup>4</sup> *Memoires*, p 109.

There comes a moment in prolonged mental suffering when the human soul, especially if young and ardent, cries out that it can bear no more, and turns desperately in any direction for relief.

'And then we will no more be racked with inward striving  
But demand of all the thousand nothings of the hour  
Their stupefying power,  
Alas! and they benumb us at our call!'

It was in a mood such as this that the end of 1774 found Marie Antoinette. She was tired of loneliness, tired of monotony, tired above all of grieving in secret over a sorrow that might never end, and meanwhile she was young and beautiful and life was sweet; why not enjoy it, grasp at pleasure and have done with care? If one could not be happy, at any rate one could be gay. So, casting prudence to the winds, she entered on that second fatal phase of her short life.

It seems to have begun gradually with the carnival of 1775—six months before the episode of the *poissardes* related above. Her popularity was at its height, and the ovations she received in Paris drew her more and more into that city. On the 13th of January the *Iphigenia* of Gluck was given at the Opera before a crowded house. The Queen's entry was greeted with acclamations, but the climax came in the second act when Achilles, instead of turning to his followers with the opening words of the chorus 'Chantez, célébrez votre reine!', came forward to the front of the stage and sang:

'Chantons, célébrons notre reine  
L'hymen qui sous ses lois l'enchaîne  
Va nous rendre à jamais heureux.'

At that the audience went mad with delight, wild applause broke out in all parts of the house, the chorus had to be repeated and the cries of 'Vive la Reine!' continued so long that the performance was held up for quite eight minutes. The Queen, touched to the heart, covered her eyes with her handkerchief to hide her tears.

Was it the adulation of the Parisians, was it the glitter of the brilliant city, then the centre of the world's civilisation, that went like wine to the head of the young Queen? At all times Paris, the enchantress, has cast her spell over the mind of eager youth, and countless ardent spirits drawn by her magic have perished in her toils. So perhaps Marie Antoinette with her empty heart and unsatisfied longings found in that world of art and beauty, of light and laughter, a solace to her pain. What wonders were to be seen at the 'marchandes de frivolités,' what exquisite silks and brocades, what ribbons and pompons, what fans and flowers, what delicious bibelots such as that marvellous eighteenth century has handed down to us! These things of which Marie Antoinette caught glimpses during her visits to Paris, which now became more frequent, were brought to her by enterprising saleswomen, spread out before her, pressed on her with all the flattery and cunning in which the Parisienne excels. And by degrees, she who had cared nothing for dress, who as Dauphine had not even troubled to choose a gown for herself, was carried away by their seductions into becoming queen of the world of fashion.

The custom of wearing the hair powdered and raised over pads to an enormous height, and surmounting it with tall feathers, had come in towards the end of 1774. In adopting this headdress Marie Antoinette had only followed the rest of her world,<sup>1</sup> but she now allowed her coiffeur to exaggerate it and lent herself to new erections of the most bizarre kind which soon became the rage. High mountains, rivers, winding streams, English gardens soon decorated the hair of all women in society; the wife of an English admiral, not to be outdone, displayed her patriotism by wearing on her head a model of the British fleet riding upon a stormy sea. The news of these extravagances soon reached Vienna and brought a letter of remonstrance from Maria Theresa.

'I cannot refrain,' she writes to her daughter on March

<sup>1</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, II 298



Lent, the time she has fixed for making up all arrears caused by the carnival.' <sup>1</sup>

Maria Theresa, who has read these reports with growing anxiety, breathes a sigh of relief when Lent comes at last: 'By the mercy of God, this eternal carnival is ended!' she writes. To which Marie Antoinette replies: 'Although the carnival amused me very much I agree that it is time it ended. Now we have gone back to our usual mode of life.' <sup>2</sup>

Yet even now Marie Antoinette was not entirely frivolous; the *Guerre des Farines*, which occurred in May, affected her deeply.<sup>3</sup> Mercy, finding her one day 'sad and dreamy,' ventured to remonstrate with her on her life of '*dissipations*'; Marie Antoinette then spoke of all the pain that her position caused her, adding that she must seek distraction and could only do this by means of more and more amusements.<sup>4</sup> Yielding to Mercy's persuasions she took up her readings again for a time with the Abbé de Vermond, but before long allowed herself to be carried away by a fresh distraction.

The King's youngest brother, the Comte d'Artois, now a wild boy of eighteen, who had long since grown tired of his dull wife, was the leading spirit in the gaieties of society at this moment. Dashing up to Paris in his cabriolet he would rush from show to show, return to Versailles for supper, then dash back to Paris at midnight and amuse himself in the garden of the Palais Royal 'surrounded,' says Mercy, 'with creatures of all kinds.' The King, whilst disapproving, was unable to restrain the young prince, who treated him with scant respect, passing in front of him in a crowd, bumping into him and 'behaving in a really shocking manner.' This, however, is less surprising when one remembers that the King himself was still no more than a boy and had not outgrown a taste for boisterous fun. He loved, as we should say to-day, to 'rag' at his *couchers*, indulging in horseplay with his attendant dukes and flinging his 'cordon bleu' at

<sup>1</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, II 298.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, II 331

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, II 307

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, II 310

their heads. The Queen succeeded, after a year or two, in curing him of this habit, and Mercy hoped she would be able also to keep the Comte d'Artois in check. Marie Antoinette evidently made valiant efforts in this direction. 'It is true,' she writes to Maria Theresa in the autumn of 1774, 'that the Comte d'Artois is turbulent and does not always conduct himself as he should, but my dear mother can rest assured that I know how to stop him as soon as he begins fooling and, far from lending myself to familiarities, I have more than once taught him mortifying lessons in front of his brothers and sisters.'<sup>1</sup>

In saying that she did not encourage familiarities Marie Antoinette no doubt spoke the truth, but in view of the Comte d'Artois' scandalous behaviour she made a mistake in appearing with him in public. She could not resist his invitations this spring of 1775 to attend the meet in the Bois de Boulogne, where he and a crowd of gay young people went to hunt the stag. True, she did not stay for the banquets that followed after, but in Mercy's opinion she should not have been there at all. Then to make matters worse, she had allowed the Comte d'Artois to take her there and bring her back in a small two-wheeled carriage known as a 'devil,' that he drove himself.

This fraternizing with the Comte d'Artois—it could not be called friendship—made a bad impression on the Parisians which nothing could efface and led to the most outrageous calumnies. In reality Marie Antoinette never had the least affection for her frivolous brother-in-law. La Marck observed that, loving physical beauty as she did, she was attracted by the fact that the Comte d'Artois danced well whilst Louis XVI and the Comte de Provence were bad dancers. And undoubtedly the slim and elegant d'Artois compared favourably with his brothers in a ball-room. But Marie Antoinette looked on him only as a playmate. When on one occasion he fell ill she lost all interest in him and frankly admitted to Mercy that 'she associated with him

<sup>1</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, ii. 254

for the purpose of pure amusement, that all friendliness ceased with these amusements because the young prince had no qualities that could inspire affection.'<sup>1</sup> These qualities she had the good sense to recognize in Louis XVI. Writing to her mother in the autumn of 1775 she said: 'The further I go the more convinced I am that if I had to choose a husband out of the three [brothers] I should still prefer the one that Heaven has given me. His character is true, and though he is awkward he shows me all the kindness and attentions possible.'<sup>2</sup>

But with her keen sense of humour Marie Antoinette could not help laughing at certain aspects of Louis XVI—his passion for carpentering, for blackening his hands at an anvil! Once these things had annoyed her and she had rated him till his eyes filled with tears, but now she had grown accustomed to it and had come to regard these odd tastes of his with amused tolerance. It was in a mood of this kind that she wrote that spring to an old friend of her family in Austria, the Comte de Rosenberg:

'My tastes are not those of the King, who only cares for hunting and working with tools. You will admit that I should look ungraceful at a forge, I should be no Vulcan and the rôle of Venus might displease him a great deal more than my tastes which he does not disapprove.'<sup>3</sup>

This indiscretion was followed by another, more serious, two months later.

It will be remembered that the Duc de Choiseul, after his strange reception by the King at La Muette, had retired to Chanteloup, but in January 1775 he returned to his splendid house in the Rue Richelieu, where he entertained all Paris with magnificent hospitality and became the hero of the day. The Choiseulistes had little difficulty in persuading Marie Antoinette to intercede with the King in his favour, and at the same time to demand the exile of the Duc d'Aiguillon, whose scandalous intrigues against the Queen

<sup>1</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, II 467.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, II 404

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, II 361

had reached her ears. Marie Antoinette succeeded on the second point but she did not succeed in obtaining the recall of Choiseul.

Another attempt was then made at the time of the coronation, when Choiseul, in his capacity of Chevalier aux Ordres du Roi, presented himself at Reims and asked for an audience of the Queen. Louis XVI, who, as we have seen, was filled with adoration for her at this moment, yielded to her request and himself fixed the hour for the interview. It was then that, flushed with triumph, she wrote a second letter to Rosenberg, in which she said :

‘I am obliged to go back to the departure of M. d’Aiguillon in order to give you a complete account of my conduct. This departure was entirely my work. The measure was overflowing. This vile man carried on all kinds of espionage and evil talk. He also tried to defy me in the matter of M. de Guines, so directly after judgement had been given, I asked the King for his dismissal.’

This account of the Duc d’Aiguillon’s activities was perfectly true; the affair of the Duc de Guines will be referred to later. Marie Antoinette then goes on to speak of her interview with the Duc de Choiseul: ‘You will readily believe that I did not see him without speaking about it to the King, but you will not guess how cleverly I managed so as not to seem to be asking permission. I told him I wanted to see M. de Choiseul, and was only in doubt about which day. I managed so well that the poor man himself arranged the most convenient hour for me to see him. I think I made good use of a woman’s rights at that moment.’<sup>1</sup>

These two letters to Rosenberg, as the publishers of this correspondence observe, are quite unlike anything Marie Antoinette had written hitherto—or indeed anything she wrote later—and one can only wonder what prompted her to commit this strange imprudence. Maria Theresa, to whom Rosenberg passed on the letters, was naturally horrified. ‘What a style! What a way of thinking!’ she wrote

<sup>1</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, II 362

to Mercy.<sup>1</sup> The epithet of 'poor man' applied to the King! Joseph II, more shocked at the political rôle she boasted of having played, wrote her a long and indignant letter, so unmeasured in its terms that Maria Theresa prevented its dispatch.<sup>2</sup> 'How do you come, my dear sister, to be concerning yourself with dismissing Ministers, with sending this one away to his estates, with giving a department to that one. . . . Have you ever asked yourself by what right you are interfering in the affairs of government and in the French monarchy? What studies have you made? . . . You, an amiable young person who thinks only of frivolity, of your toilet and your amusements. . . . If ever such a letter as this [the one about Choiseul] went astray . . .'<sup>3</sup>

Little did Marie Antoinette guess that this fatal letter would be preserved in the Archives of the Imperial family and handed down to posterity for every hostile writer to quote against her. Yet what did it all amount to? That on the impulse of the moment and in a joking mood this girl of nineteen had allowed her pen to run away with her and convey a totally false impression both of her feeling for the King and of the part she was playing in public life. In speaking of her husband as 'le pauvre homme' she had not intended to express contempt, for 'pauvre' is not the equivalent of 'poor' in English, but a word that Marie Antoinette often uses rather fondly, as when later she constantly speaks of her baby daughter as 'la pauvre petite.'

Mercy, more indulgent than usual, understood this. The Queen, he wrote to Maria Theresa, had told him of the interview with Choiseul as a thing that had happened by chance, he was sure she had brought no plan or finesse into the matter. 'It was only afterwards that her Majesty in writing to the Comte de Rosenberg had the idea of giving an amusing turn to a thing that had taken place quite naturally.' As to the King, although the Queen might sometimes be wanting in little attentions towards him, it was

<sup>1</sup> *Maria Thérèse et Mercy*, II 360

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, II 363

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, II 363

certain that she respected him, that she was even 'jealous of his glory,' and Mercy went so far as to say that although her vivacity and thoughtlessness might sometimes mask her true sentiments and that fault might be found with her in the matter of outward forms, 'from the point of *morale* and conduct the Queen is without reproach.'<sup>1</sup>

Had not her attitude at the recent coronation proved the truth of Mercy's words? Had she not shown herself then 'jealous of his glory'? Had she not actually fainted with emotion at the acclamations he had received from the people? This great loyalty to his cause characterized her to the end. Whatever pain he gave her during these first seven years of their marriage, however much his odd moments of lethargy exasperated her, his roughness jarred on her, and later on his irresolution reduced her to despair, she never ceased to revere his innate goodness, never missed an opportunity to show him in his best light to the world, and when the dark days came, stood by him, a true daughter of the Caesars, ready to die in his defence.

<sup>1</sup> *Mme Thérèse et Mercy*, II 371

## CHAPTER VIII

### LA REINE S'AMUSE

THE more one studies the history of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette the more one realizes that their great misfortune lay in the character of the people by whom they were surrounded. If only the King had had abler Ministers, if only the Queen had had worthier friends, how differently events might have turned out!

Unfortunately, in this year of 1775, at the most critical moment in her life, Marie Antoinette encountered two women who were destined to play a fatal part in her career.

The first of these was not even a friend, but merely a *marchande de modes*. Mlle Rose Bertin, who had been introduced to the Queen by the Princesse de Lamballe, was the immortal type of the *grande couturière* of Paris, who in our own day has ruined many a foolish woman by her persuasive eloquence, flattering and cajoling her into purchases she never intended, airily dismissing the question of cost as a matter too trifling to consider.

Plump, prosperous in appearance, insinuating in her manner, Mlle Bertin understood this art to perfection, and before long she succeeded in winning the Queen's confidence so completely that, instead of leaving it to her lady of the bedchamber, as in the past, to carry out such transactions, Marie Antoinette took to dealing with Mlle Bertin direct and according her long private interviews. It is easy to imagine that with no experience of 'shopping' or the art of bargaining, and with no idea of what anything should cost, the Queen fell an easy prey to the artful woman's blandishments.

This new order of things caused great discontent amongst

the ladies of the Court who assembled in the state bedroom for the ceremony of the toilette, to which Mlle Bertin could not be admitted, and they were deeply mortified when, on the arrival of the favoured dressmaker, the Queen retired with her into her *petits appartements* to be dressed by her and listen to her ideas for new creations. Their annoyance was increased still further by the fact that Mlle Bertin became in time so arrogant and puffed up with importance that she would hardly deign to attend to her other customers. The story went round Paris that a certain lady from the provinces visited Mlle Bertin's shop in the Rue St. Honoré and asked to be shown a headdress; the haughty milliner looked her up and down, as if to see whether she was worth dressing, and having apparently decided in her favour, turned imperiously to one of her assistants saying: 'Show Madame the result of my last work with her Majesty.'<sup>1</sup>

The result of these labours seems certainly to have been successful, and at first the Queen does not appear to have been drawn into extravagance; moreover, the fashions were now less exaggerated than they had been earlier in the year. 'Feathers are waning,' Horace Walpole wrote that summer of 1775 from Paris, 'and are almost confined to *filles* and foreigners,' and he describes a ball he attended at Versailles this August. 'There were eight minuets, a pas de deux; after the minuets French country dances much encumbered by the long trains, longer tresses and hoops'—and he goes on to say:

'It was impossible to see anything but the Queen! Hebes and Floras and Helens and Graces are street-walkers to her. She is a statue of beauty, when standing or sitting; grace itself when she moves. She was dressed in silver, scattered over with lauriers roses; few diamonds and feathers, much lower than the Monument. They say she does not dance in time, but then it is wrong to dance in time.'<sup>2</sup>

Is it surprising that a woman so entrancing and still so

<sup>1</sup> Baronne d'Oberkirch, *Mémoires*, 1 144.

<sup>2</sup> Horace Walpole, *Letters*. Letter of August 23, 1775



young in this wonderful world of Versailles should for a while have felt life go to her head? But still there was no question of coquetry; friendship was all she sought.

So far her only intimate friend had been the Princesse de Lamballe, who as Marie Thérèse de Savoie Carignan, had married, in 1767, the only son of the Duc de Penthièvre, grandson of Louis XIV and Mme de Montespan. The Prince de Lamballe, worn out with dissipation, died in the following year and his young widow continued to live with her father-in-law, one of the most benevolent nobles of the day, seconding his efforts to relieve the lot of the poor with so much success that she became known as 'the good angel' on his estates. Although not strictly beautiful and far from brilliant, the Princesse de Lamballe, with her large gentle eyes, her long fair curls and air of tender melancholy, charmed Marie Antoinette, who became devoted to her whilst still Dauphine, and now in the autumn of 1775 she asked for the post of *surintendante* of her household to be revived in favour of her friend. This post, which had been done away with thirty-four years earlier, carried with it the obligation to entertain largely at the Court and consequently a high salary to meet expenses. Mme de Lamballe's was now fixed at 150,000 livres (£6,562) a year.

Marie Antoinette was not unnaturally blamed for this weakening on the principles of economy, to which, in agreement with the King and Turgot, she had held hitherto; it seems indeed the more surprising since just at this moment her affection for Mme de Lamballe had slightly cooled. The kind good woman had failed to satisfy entirely Marie Antoinette's longing for an ideal friendship, and now a rival had arisen in her path. Perhaps it was by way of compensation that Marie Antoinette secured so important an appointment for the friend who was no longer to have the first place in her heart.

This rival, though a very different kind of woman to Mlle Bertin, was to prove no less fatal to Marie Antoinette than the insinuating *marchande de modes*.

Gabrielle Yolande de Polastron, who at seventeen had married the Comte Jules de Polignac, was now at twenty-six, according to contemporaries, a being of celestial loveliness; all speak of her heavenly blue eyes, her enchanting smile, her soft brown hair falling in ringlets on her shoulders. The Polignacs were poor and only spent a few months of the year in Paris, and whilst there in the spring of 1775 the Comtesse had been brought by her sister-in-law, the Comtesse Diane de Polignac, lady-in-waiting to the Comtesse d'Artois, to some of the Queen's balls at Versailles. Marie Antoinette, wearied by the artificial women of the Court, was instantly attracted by this girl's perfect naturalness and asked her why she had not appeared before at Versailles. Mme de Polignac admitted frankly that she could not afford to be often at the Court, and the Queen, touched by this confession, liked her all the better; she liked her candid expression, her artless manner, her simple way of dressing, for even later on, at the height of her prosperity, the Comtesse seldom wore diamonds, a knot of ribbon and a real rose in her hair were the adornments she preferred. Nothing more innocent than the quick sympathy between these two young women can be imagined; here at last Marie Antoinette began to feel was the really understanding and disinterested friend for whom she had looked in vain.

Up to a point Marie Antoinette had judged her rightly. Mme de Polignac, indolent and easy-going, was quite without ambition and showed no desire to exchange her quiet life for the glitter of the Court. Indeed she took some persuading before she could be induced to come and live at Versailles, at first in a modest hotel in the Rue des Bons Enfants, and in no official capacity. A year later, however, the Queen obtained for the Comte de Polignac the appointment of successor to her first equerry, the Comte de Tessé. This entitled him to a provisional pension of 12,000 livres (about £525) a year, and the use of the Queen's horses, carriages and liveries, which increased the expenses of her household by 80,000 livres (£3,500). In those days it was

the custom to keep a fabulous number of horses, and Marie Antoinette's passion for riding had led her already into buying a larger number than Mercy approved. But now her stable was to be further increased through the appointment of the Comte de Polignac, and Mercy complains that whilst Marie Leczinska had only a hundred and fifty horses, by the time the Comte has finished buying, Marie Antoinette will have three hundred, and her stable expenses will cost 200,000 livres (£8,750) more than that of the late Queen.<sup>1</sup>

At the same moment that the Comte de Polignac obtained this appointment he and his wife were given a fine apartment in the château, close to the Queen's own, at the head of the great marble staircase.

This favour shown to the Polignacs was the first cause for the decline of the Queen's popularity. As time went on more and more benefits were showered on them. For although Mme de Polignac, at any rate in the beginning, does not seem to have been designing, her relations were just the reverse, and it was her husband and sister-in-law, the Comtesse Diane, who gradually persuaded her to use her influence with the Queen to obtain all kinds of advantages for themselves. The Comte de la Marck, whilst asserting that the Polignacs' society did great harm to the Queen and consequently to the monarchy, declares, however, that the sums spent on them were very much exaggerated. 'The pecuniary advantages that the favoured members of this society drew from their connection with the Court cannot be compared with the fortunes of the old-time favourites. In reality the Comte and Comtesse Jules de Polignac only received just what was necessary to keep up a household at Versailles which became for a time that of the Queen, and where the King sometimes put in an appearance.'<sup>2</sup> It is impossible to judge how far this statement is correct; the figures given by Mercy, which will be referred to later, seem

<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to note, however, that when the aunts went to Vichy for a cure they took with them no less than a hundred and sixty horses. Ségur, *Au Couchant*, II 176

<sup>2</sup> *Mirabeau et la Marck*, II. 29



to be considerable, though, as will be seen, it was not entirely the fault of the Queen.

Once installed at Versailles the Polignacs collected their own friends around them, and soon it was no longer they who were admitted to the intimacy of the Queen, but the Queen who took to visiting their apartment and was drawn into their set.

This set was undoubtedly far more amusing than the Court circles in which Marie Antoinette had moved hitherto. Most of them were young and gay, many talented; it would be a mistake to dismiss them all as empty-headed idlers. For the first time Marie Antoinette found herself surrounded by attractive men—for it was mainly men whom Mme de Polignac gathered round her. There was the Comte Valentin d'Esterhazy, a young Hungarian, a brilliant soldier, recommended to the Queen by Maria Theresa and received by her a year earlier, who now became one of her greatest friends. Then the Duc de Coigny, aged thirty-eight, first equerry to the King, brave, charming, with exquisite manners, wholly free from intrigue; and sometimes that most original and delightful of characters, the Prince de Ligne, soldier, poet, writer, *bel esprit*, and horticulturist, who had become *persona grata* at the various Courts of Europe.

But the principal leaders of Mme de Polignac's set were men of lesser mark—the Baron de Besenval, the Comte d'Adhémar, and the Comte de Vaudreuil, all talented but all intriguers and dangerous associates for the Queen. Besenval, a rich Swiss bachelor, Lieutenant-Colonel of the Swiss Guards in France, was now nearly fifty, but his iron health enabled him to retain all the gaiety and gallantry of youth. D'Adhémar, also a soldier, who had distinguished himself in the Seven Years' War, was remarkable mainly for his talents as a singer, an actor and a versifier. Vaudreuil, Grand Falconer at the Court, the leading spirit of the trio, was a complex character, combining the most charming manners with a violent and uncontrollable temper. Liberal

with his money, he was also a Liberal in his views and, whilst owing his position and his means entirely to the Court, loved to dream of a Golden Age of equality in the future. Posing as 'a man of nature' he professed to despise the artificiality of Court life and had been heard to declare that: 'The rarity of true feeling there is so great that when I return from Versailles I stop to watch a dog gnawing a bone in the street.'<sup>1</sup>

In Mme de Polignac's society Marie Antoinette at first felt almost happy. No more lonely hours in the *petits appartements* playing the harpsichord and working at tapestry, no more dull evenings spent in Court ceremonial; instead, cheerful gatherings in the Polignacs' salon, with music, songs, billiards, *bons mots* and conviviality. It was often late at night when she slipped past the sleepy watchers in the Salle des Gardes on her way back to her great bedroom where the King, who had long since retired to rest, was not to be found.

That Mme de Polignac was unworthy of the affection lavished on her by Marie Antoinette became evident in the long run. But at all times royal personages have shown strange aberrations in their choice of friends, at all times kings and queens have delighted to honour people who could win no respect from the more discerning of their subjects. The reason is not far to seek. Brought up in an entourage chosen for them, surrounded by Court officials who direct their movements, divided by a barrier of etiquette from the heterogeneous world of society, they never learn to discriminate, to judge human nature, even to distinguish shades of breeding, they never see men and women off their guard, shorn of the respect which the presence of royalty imposes. In the matter of friendship they cannot know who are their real friends, liking them for themselves and not for the glamour of their position.

In this respect, therefore, Marie Antoinette was not unique. If she had mixed as an ordinary member of society

<sup>1</sup> *Correspondance intime du Comte de Vaudreuil et du Comte d'Artois*, edited by Léonce Pingaud (1889), 1 p xvi

in the great world of Paris and had been able to compare Mme de Polignac with other women of her day she would no doubt have realized her futility. But she saw only the sweetness and simplicity that distinguished her from the pompous ladies of the Court. And she was tired of courtiers, tired of flattery, tired even of being a Queen. In Mme de Polignac she believed she had found a friend with whom she could throw off all constraint and talk as one woman to another. 'When I am with you,' she would say to her, 'I am no longer the Queen, I am myself.'

The Polignac set was not the only new environment in which Marie Antoinette found herself this autumn of 1775. A worse one was the salon of the Princesse de Guéménée, daughter of the Prince de Soubise, whose official post at the Court was known as 'gouvernante des Enfants de France' which, since the King had no children, was reduced to taking charge of his young sister Madame Elizabeth, who was now eleven years old. Hard, intriguing and worldly-minded, Mme de Guéménée inspired no great affection in Marie Antoinette, who, however, took to frequenting her noisy balls and card-parties merely for the sake of distraction. The people here collected were younger and still more frivolous than the Polignac set, their conversation was indiscreet and often risqué, worst of all the play was terrifically high. It was here that Marie Antoinette acquired the habit of gambling that was to prove so disastrous.

Insensibly a change began to take place in her character, she who had been so rigid on the subject of morality seemed almost indifferent to the morals of these new friends of hers. The Duc de Coigny was the lover of Mme de Guéménée, the Comte de Vaudreuil of Mme de Polignac, liaisons of this kind were regarded indulgently, as indeed they have always been in French society, whether under a monarchist or a Republican régime.<sup>1</sup> If Marie Antoinette did not

<sup>1</sup> Mercy, whilst deploring the morals of the Queen's new friends, was hardly the man to judge them, for he, himself a bachelor, had lived for years with Mlle Rosalie Levasseur, an opera-singer, who remained his faithful companion till his death.

condone these things, at any rate she shut her eyes to them ; blinded by her affection for Mme de Polignac and carried away by the craving for constant excitement, she did not pause to think whither she was drifting. It was through these influences that she allowed herself to be drawn into the agitation taking place in the spring of 1776 for the dismissal of Turgot.

We have already seen the lengths to which the enemies of the Comptroller General were prepared to go by forging letters containing sarcasms against the Queen. Marie Antoinette had other causes for personal resentment; Turgot, according to Soulavie, was 'the inveterate enemy of Austria' and of the Franco-Austrian alliance. Besides this, Marie Antoinette had constituted herself the champion of a man whom she believed Turgot to have treated unjustly.

This was a rather ridiculous personage, the Duc de Guines, one of the wittiest members of the Polignacs' circle. Afflicted with embonpoint, which continued steadily to increase, the Duke encased himself in the tightest breeches in order to appear slimmer. For this purpose he had two pairs to go with each of his coats, one for sitting and one for standing, and his valet would ask him solemnly at his toilet: 'Will Monsieur le Duc be sitting down to-day?' If it happened to be an occasion when he expected to remain standing, he would then mount on a chair and descend into the breeches held out to him by two of his men.

As ambassador first in Berlin, then in London, the Comte, later the Duc, de Guines had made himself popular, but whilst in England, after an affair with Lady Craven which caused some scandal, he became involved in certain shady transactions carried on by his secretary, who had made use of his position to traffic in State secrets and even in contraband goods. The Duc d'Aiguillon, a bitter enemy of the Comte de Guines, succeeded in implicating him in these dealings, and a duel between the Choiseulistes, supporters of the Comte de Guines, and the party of the Duc d'Aiguillon was carried on for several years. The Comte de Guines was



finally acquitted of all charges by the Parlement of Paris in June 1775, and it was then that Marie Antoinette, who had taken his part all along, wrote her indiscreet letter to Rosenberg in which she referred to the way the Duc d'Aiguillon had defied her in the matter of her protégé.

Turgot, however, had ranged himself on the other side, and it was mainly as the opponent of the Comte de Guines that the Choiseulistes, the Polignac set, and with them Marie Antoinette, wished for his dismissal in May 1776, at the same moment that the Comte de Guines was made a duke. Whether the Queen contributed to Turgot's downfall is an open question, both Voltaire and also Condorcet, the intimate friend of Turgot, were of the opinion that she had nothing to do with it,<sup>1</sup> and she herself assured Maria Theresa that though she was not sorry to see Turgot go, she had not concerned herself in the matter. Mercy, however, declared that she had urged the King not only to dismiss Turgot but to send him to the Bastille for his injustice to the Duc de Guines, and he expressed his astonishment that the Queen should take up the cause so hotly of a man 'for whom she could have no personal affection.' The fault was in her entourage—the Polignacs and the circle of Mme de Guéménée, in their turn secretly supported by Maurepas, whom Mercy describes at this moment as having succeeded in completely winning over Mme de Polignac and directing her actions. In this case of wheels within wheels it is difficult to apportion the blame, but if the Queen really contributed to the fall of Turgot, it seems to have been mainly out of a quixotic championship of one she believed to have been the victim of injustice, an act of folly rather than malice.

Mercy attributed her conduct at this moment to the fact that her new friends had so 'intoxicated' her with amusement that it was impossible to make her listen to reason. Unfortunately the King provided no restraining influence, for his devotion blinded him to her faults and he was ready

<sup>1</sup> Foncin, *op cit*, p. 530, note De Véri also says 'The Queen also, only opposed him mildly,' 1 447

to fall in with her wishes at every turn. Perhaps better than anyone he understood the secret grief which made her feel the need of constant distraction and, knowing that it was caused by his own failure to fulfil the great desire of her heart, he could not bring himself to deny her anything that might give her pleasure.

It was thus that he put no check on the extravagance into which she now allowed herself to be led.

Marie Antoinette was fond of jewels, but so far she had resisted all temptations to spend money on them, and as Dauphine had refused the diamond earrings that Mme du Barry had offered to persuade Louis XV to buy for her, saying she had enough diamonds and did not wish for any more. Louis XVI, however, since his accession, had given her a great number, and the jeweller of the du Barry, a German Jew named Böhmer, realizing the Queen's weakness for them, now saw his chance of a deal. Just before the death of Louis XV, he had made at great expense a magnificent pair of pendant earrings composed of six pear-shaped diamonds of enormous size which he hoped to dispose of to the favourite. This expectation being frustrated by the death of the King, Bohmer now, in January 1776, brought his earrings to the Queen and begged her to buy them at a cost of 600,000 livres (£26,250). Marie Antoinette, fascinated by the beauty of the stones, longed to have them but demurred at the price. Bohmer, however, suggested he should remove the two large brilliants composing the studs of the earrings, which would reduce the cost to 460,000 livres (£20,125)—Mme Campan says 360,000, but Mercy, who gives the higher figure, is more likely to be correct. Marie Antoinette finally yielded to the persuasions of Bohmer and bought the earrings for the price named, to be paid for by instalments out of her privy purse.

But this was not all. Six months later Bohmer reappeared with a fresh temptation—a pair of diamond bracelets for which he asked 250,000 livres (£10,937). Over-persuaded, says Mercy, by her entourage, the Queen again yielded,

although she had not yet paid off the cost of the earrings, and she now found herself obliged very reluctantly to ask the King for 2000 louis, which he paid up with only a mild remonstrance. The imprudent purchase of the earrings and bracelets in 1776 paved the way for the affair of the necklace nine years later.

In vain Mercy had protested against both these transactions, in vain Maria Theresa wrote saying she was cut to the heart when the story reached her; they had lectured Marie Antoinette so often for harmless diversions that she had become proof against their scoldings. 'So my bracelets have reached Vienna!' she said lightly to Mercy, and to her mother she wrote: 'I have nothing to say about the bracelets, I did not think anyone could seek to trespass on my dear mother's kindness with such trifles.'

Meanwhile Mlle Bertin was feathering her nest. For the first time since Marie Antoinette's accession to the throne the expenses of the wardrobe began to go up. In this matter, however, the Queen seems to have been less to blame than has been generally supposed. The recent researches of M. Pierre de Nolhac in the Archives Nationales of Paris throw a new and interesting light on this question. For there is still preserved the record of the Queen's wardrobe from 1776 to 1792; there too is the pathetic book with patterns of her dresses pasted on the pages, which was handed to her every morning for her to place a pin on each dress she wished to wear during the day. The most important item in this record is a series of memoirs by the secretary of the wardrobe giving an account of all the expenses incurred in her name during those years. From this emerges the surprising fact that the sum allotted to the wardrobe, 120,000 livres (£5,250) a year, had not been increased in 1780 since she was a young Dauphine of only sixteen. Now, as we have already seen at that time, the control of the wardrobe was left entirely in the hands of the lady of the bedchamber, and although the Dauphine chose nothing for herself the annual sum had at first been vastly

exceeded owing to the 'enormous pillage' that had taken place. It is therefore hardly surprising that now she was a Queen of twenty-one it should have been still more difficult to keep down expenses. Up till 1776, however, the Duchesse de Cossé, lady of the bedchamber, seems to have succeeded in avoiding excess, for so far no additional sum had been demanded. But the appearance of Mlle Bertin on the scene had upset all her calculations, for the control had been taken out of her hands by the Queen's new plan of dealing direct with the grasping dressmaker. Taking advantage of Marie Antoinette's inexperience and *laissez-faire*, Mlle Bertin ran up terrific bills which she refused to send in until long afterwards, when the total amount given without any details burst on the lady of the bedchamber like a thunderbolt. As a result the accounts of the wardrobe now began to show a deficit, first in the year 1776 of 28,000 livres (£1,225), which continued to mount yearly until in 1780 it had reached the amount of 106,000 livres (£4,637, 10s.), that is to say a total expenditure of 226,000 livres (£9,887, 10s.) for the year.<sup>1</sup>

It was then that Mme d'Ossun succeeded Mme de Cossé to the post of lady of the bedchamber. Geneviève de Grammont, married to the Comte d'Ossun, was a good and charming woman who had been lady of the bedchamber to the Comtesse de Provence. On taking over the same post with the Queen in 1780 she honestly tried her best to restore order in the department of the wardrobe, but found it impossible to keep expenses down to the fixed sum of 120,000 livres a year. The reasons given for this in the memoir by the secretary of the wardrobe are for one thing that this sum was fixed in 1725, since which date prices have risen enormously. Then again dress has become more elaborate, expensive headdresses are worn and the fashions change more quickly. But still the main trouble is Mlle Bertin. By way of reform it is now arranged that:

'The *marchandes de modes* shall no longer deal directly with

<sup>1</sup> P. de Nolhac, *Autour de la Reine*, p. 259

the Queen without having first obtained permission from the lady of the bedchamber or the lady of the wardrobe; they shall take those things chosen to the wardrobe in order to state the materials and the price, instead of leaving them with the Queen and only stating this three or four months later when they send in their accounts. The demoiselle Bertin continually departs from this regulation, so that one is very often obliged to look through her accounts twice for things one has never seen nor been able to value, and to pay her for them without being sure they have ever been provided.' <sup>1</sup>

In all these memoirs there is no complaint of any wilful extravagance on the part of Marie Antoinette. It is evident that she was robbed right and left by the dressmakers, and no doubt by the ladies'-maids also as in 1772. For to judge by the items of which the accounts of the wardrobe are composed, quantities of things must have been charged for either at exorbitant prices, or as the above memoir suggests, entered in the bill without ever having been supplied. The item of 11,520 livres (circ. £504) for ribbons alone is a case in point, for no woman, had she clothed herself entirely in ribbons, could have absorbed so vast an amount. Mercy had quoted this in 1772 as one of the things in which her women were the most wasteful: 'The ladies'-maids make out an expense of four pairs of shoes a week, three ells of ribbon for tying the peignoir of Mme la Dauphine, two ells of taffeta a day for covering the basket where her gloves and fan are placed, and so on with an infinity of other things.' <sup>2</sup>

Where Marie Antoinette herself was to blame was in not putting a stop to what Mercy called 'these robberies' and in giving Mlle Bertin a free hand. As we shall see later, the woman's bills actually increased after the Queen had adopted a simpler style of dressing.

<sup>1</sup> P de Nolhac, *op cit*, p 262 and note comment of M Lenôtre. 'We have the books of Mlle Bertin, amongst these rows of things provided we can see how much the Queen has been calumniated'—*Revue des Deux Mondes* for January 15, 1936, p 344.

<sup>2</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, 1 277.

But the really serious item of expenditure between 1776 and 1778 was represented by Marie Antoinette's losses at cards. Gambling had become the rage in Paris in the preceding century, but high play at the Court had been confined to the King's mistresses and their entourage. Mme de Montespan had been known to lose as much as 700,000 écus (£91,875) in one evening.<sup>1</sup> The Queens of France held their 'jeu' nightly as an institution of the Court, but Marie Leczinska indulged in nothing more ruinous than tric-trac and what were known as 'jeux de commerce,' at which it was impossible to lose large sums; the introduction of pharaon to Marie Antoinette's 'jeu' led to gambling of a more desperate kind. From September 18, 1775, the date of Mercy's first complaint on this score, his letters to Maria Theresa, Joseph II, and the Prince de Kaunitz contain constant references to the Queen's passion for games of chance over which she makes heavy losses. In January 1777 he goes through her accounts and finds to his consternation and hers that she has incurred debts during the past year amounting to no less a sum than 487,272 livres (£21,318), which she has no means of paying. The King, however, comes to the rescue, and since he refuses to draw on the royal Treasury, decides to pay the amount by instalments out of his privy purse. 'As he is naturally very economical,' says Mercy, 'this generosity astonished the Queen.' Yet unfortunately it does not cure her taste for high play, perhaps like all gamblers she hoped by risking more to retrieve her losses. The next month Mercy reports again that she has sat up all night at the tables, in June that she continues to play at the Princesse de Guéménée's, once she loses as much as 500 louis in an evening—a mere trifle to Mme de Montespan's losses, but deplorable at a time when the King has set so splendid an example of economy in his own expenses. Yet Marie Antoinette was not a born gambler. The fall of the cards, the clink of coin that go like wine to the head of those in whom the passion for play is

<sup>1</sup> *Marie Therèse et Mercy*, 1 71

innate, made no special appeal to her; she gambled because she was unhappy and turned to anything that changed the current of her thoughts. Mercy, who tried to reason with her, received only the answer that she dreaded ennui, and he agreed with Joseph II in saying after his visit to France that *au fond* Marie Antoinette did not care for gambling;<sup>1</sup> it was only part of that craving for excitement which at this date drove her on from one amusement to another.

Mercy's reports now begin to show more serious grounds for complaint than in the days when riding was her chief crime. There is, for example, her taste for racing—a craze recently introduced from England.

The first horse-race had taken place in France under Louis XV, on February 28, 1766, when Lord Forbes had run a horse against the Comte de Lauraguais, but this had led to so much scandal that the King forbade any repetition of the sport. Louis XVI, though as much opposed to *anglomanie* in all its forms as his predecessor, nevertheless allowed it to be revived, and the first race of his reign was run on the plain of the Sablons on March 9, 1775. The Queen came to it 'beautiful as the day,' with the Comte and Comtesse de Provence and the Comte d'Artois. By the autumn it had become a habit, and the Queen's stand was surrounded by a noisy crowd of young men in riding clothes—'disgracefully dressed,' says Mercy—whilst the Comte d'Artois rushed about laying wagers, shouting loudly when he won, loudly lamenting when he lost, cheering on his jockeys and even presenting any who had won a race to the Queen.<sup>2</sup> In vain Marie Antoinette maintained an air of dignity throughout; the public were none the less shocked to see her in these surroundings.

They were shocked too because that winter, an unusually severe one, she took to sleighing with the Princesse de Lamballe, and even ventured as far afield as the boulevards of Paris, an innocent form of amusement which for some

<sup>1</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, III. 132.

reason the Parisians held to be unfitting in a Queen, and further resented as an importation from Vienna.

But now, in the winter of 1777, we come to the amusement that has been made the greatest subject of reproach to Marie Antoinette—the masked balls at the Opera. It was not her appearance at these masquerades which formed a ground of accusation, for, as we have seen, they were frequented by the best society, and Louis XVI had taken her to them himself whilst still the Dauphin. But since then he had lost his taste for them, and it was the fact of her attending them without him that caused the trouble. The Queen of course did not go alone, but either with the Comte de Provence, the Comte d'Artois or one of her suite, and, when there, was always followed closely by an officer of her bodyguard, whilst a lady-in-waiting remained at her side.<sup>1</sup>

The Queen, writes Mercy on February 17, 1777, 'has not been able to resist coming to two balls at the Palais-Royal [given by the Duc de Chartres] and to five or six masked balls at the Opera. There she talks to everybody, walks about followed by young men, a number of foreigners, particularly English, whom she singles out, and all this with a familiarity to which the public will never grow accustomed.'<sup>2</sup>

This preference for the English, Mercy explains, is owing to the fact that they dance well, and for that reason the Queen finds them useful for her own balls. It is clear, however, that these English were all men known to her; in saying that she 'talks to everybody' Mercy does not mean that she speaks to strangers, for he says specifically 'it sometimes happens that the Queen condescends to walk about the ball with men, but always with people who are known and distinguished. Her Majesty has done the same honour to a few foreigners, notably the Duke of Dorset [later the British ambassador], an English cavalier whom the Queen treats particularly well'<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, III 19

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, III. 25

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, III 19



Again, when a rumour reached Maria Theresa that on one of these occasions the Comte de Provence had left her side and 'she remained alone for two or three hours talking indiscriminately with various masqueraders who took her round on their arms,' Mercy replied indignantly:

'The Queen was not alone for a moment and she gave her arm to nobody except the Duc de Choiseul, but the absurdity and improbability of the lies invented here at every turn have no limit.'<sup>1</sup>

The amusement Marie Antoinette found in these entertainments seems to have consisted in the fun of talking under cover of a mask to people whom, like the Comte de Fersen, she knew already, fondly imagining they did not guess who she was, and enjoying their mystification as to her identity. 'The Queen,' says the Prince de Ligne, 'in order not to be recognized—which she always was by us and even by Frenchmen who saw her the least often—addressed herself to foreigners in order to intrigue them. From this arose a thousand stories of lovers—English, Russian, Swedish and Polish. I did not like her going there on this account and also because of next day. She was never tiresome except then, for she had so much to relate about the masqueraders, and what she had said and what he had said, that it was unbearable. If we had wanted to do the same it would have been spicier than her supposed adventures.'<sup>2</sup>

The very innocence of these stories made the young men of the Court look at each other and smile; how little she knew of the kind of adventures they would have thought amusing!

What then of the lovers attributed to Marie Antoinette? Let us examine these accusations in turn.

The earliest libel on her character had appeared in 1774, before even her worst enemies at the Court had dared to impugn it and whilst her conduct was in every way exemplary. This was a pamphlet printed in London and

<sup>1</sup> *Maria Thérèse et Mercy*, II 438

<sup>2</sup> *Mémoires du Prince de Ligne* (1860), p. 75.

entitled *Avis important à la couronne de France, à défaut d'héritiers et qui peut être très utile à toute la famille de Bourbon, surtout au roi Louis XVI*. The author signed himself G. A., which stood for a Jew named Guillaume Angelucci. The object of the pamphlet was to show that since Louis XVI could not have children, the coquetry of the Queen might lead her into some criminal intrigue against which the *heirs to the throne* should guard themselves. It is impossible not to suspect here the hand of the Comte de Provence, and when the statement is made that 'the most certain means for safeguarding this young woman would be to confide her to the vigilance of the virtuous princesses, her aunts,' a further source of inspiration suggests itself. This pamphlet having reached the King, the playwright Beaumarchais, who had been employed by Louis XV to track down a libeller of Mme du Barry, was dispatched to London in pursuit of 'le juif Angelucci,' who appears not to have been the author of the pamphlet but merely the man whom the secret enemies of the Queen had entrusted with its publication. After entering into negotiations with the Jew, Beaumarchais bought up and destroyed the whole edition printed in London and a second edition in Amsterdam, but then discovered that Angelucci had made off with a single copy which he had saved from destruction. Thereupon Beaumarchais repaired to Vienna in the hope of ingratiating himself with Maria Theresa, who, however, regarded his conduct with suspicion and had him kept under arrest in his room for a month. Her chancellor, the Prince de Kaunitz, actually suggested that Beaumarchais had written the pamphlet himself and that no such person as Angelucci existed. But this was not the general opinion in France; the style of the pamphlet was quite unlike that of Beaumarchais, and 'le juif Angelucci' is known not to have been a myth.<sup>1</sup> The whole affair filled the Empress with con-

<sup>1</sup> Funck-Brentano, *L'Affaire du Collier*, p. 53 and note, and *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, II 224. For a detailed account of this episode see L. de Loménie, *Beaumarchais et son Temps*, I 387-404.

sternation. 'I could not have believed,' she wrote to Mercy on August 28, 1774, 'that the inveterate hatred directed against the Austrians, against my person and the poor innocent Queen was so unalterably implanted in the hearts of the French. So this is the end of all the adulation which has been lavished! This is the love they bear my daughter! Nothing so atrocious has ever appeared, and it fills one's heart with utter contempt for this nation without religion, morals or feelings.'<sup>1</sup>

Mercy replied with great good sense that 'the French nation in general must not be confounded with a small number of people who form the scum of it and who are disowned and abhorred by this same nation, which though indiscreet and thoughtless is not malicious by nature and is the first to feel indignation at the horrible calumnies presented to it.' And Mercy goes on to relate that the people, imagining for some reason that the Chancellor Maupeou had been concerned in calumnies on Marie Antoinette, had burnt his effigy on the 24th of August to cries of: 'Let us avenge our charming Queen on this wretch who has dared to write and utter libels!' If the author of the recent pamphlet had been discovered in Paris, Mercy is convinced that nothing would prevent the people tearing him limb from limb.<sup>2</sup>

At about the same date a most harmless incident was made the subject for another libel. Whilst the Court was at Marly in the summer of 1774, the Queen happened to read a wonderful description of sunrise which thrilled her so much that she conceived the idea of seeing this spectacle for herself. Accordingly, she asked the King's permission to wait up until three o'clock in the morning and invited him to join her in her vigil. Louis XVI gave the required permission, but nothing would persuade him to postpone his bedtime till so late an hour, and he answered that where the beauty of a sunrise was concerned he would take other people's word for it. The Queen therefore made up a party consisting of the rest

<sup>1</sup> *Marie Therèse et Mercy*, II 224

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, II. 231, 232.

of the royal family, the Ministers, several *grands seigneurs* of the Court and even the foreign ambassadors, who were all summoned to join her in the ceremony of greeting the dawn, which the bodyguard of the château were ordered to celebrate by firing a salute. According to one account the whole party assembled in the salons of the château, Mme Campan, however, relates that they all went up to the heights of Marly, and that to avoid any scandal attaching to this nocturnal expedition the Queen ordered her women also to accompany her. In the midst of this brilliant assembly, Marie Antoinette, standing between the Princesse de Lamballe and 'Mme l'Etiquette,' watched the first rays of the sun lighting up the horizon and cried out: 'How lovely! oh, how lovely!'

A few days later an abominable poem entitled 'The Rising of Aurora [*Le Lever de l'Aurore*]' was circulated throughout Paris, presenting this innocent expedition in the most compromising light, saying that Marie Antoinette could not conceal her joy at Louis XVI's refusal to take part in it, and that 'on a futile pretext she had disappeared into the thickets of the park where for a long while she remained lost to sight.'

But apart from these ebullitions by anonymous libellists no one at that date attempted to impugn the character of Marie Antoinette, and it was not until she entered the Polignac and Guéménée sets that any aspersions were cast on her at the Court. Until then her society had comprised no young men with whom her name could possibly be coupled, but now in her new entourage she was surrounded by men not only young but gay, attractive and flirtatious, with whom it was easy to make out she had indulged her supposed inclination to coquetry. Her enemies in the royal family and the 'eyes' of Europe all busied themselves discovering cause for scandal. From October 1775 onwards, de Viry, the Sardinian ambassador, primed by the Comtesse de Provence and the Duc d'Aiguillon, fills his reports with malicious gossip about her growing taste for the society of

young men, the favour shown to Besenval, then to the Duc de Coigny who 'has the entrée at certain hours to her apartments.' This, observes de Viry, has caused remarks to be made—we can guess by whom—which, he has the decency to add, he himself is inclined to regard as calumnies.<sup>1</sup>

As time went on the libels published against the Queen became vitriolic, more and more names were added to the list of her supposed lovers until she was accused of a liaison with almost every man who came near her—the Baron de Besenval, the Comte de Vaudreuil, the Comte d'Adhémar, 'le beau Dillon,' the Duc de Guines, Lord Seymour, Lord Strathavon, Prince George of Hesse-Darmstadt, a certain Lambertye, and one du Roure, later the Comte de Fersen, the Duke of Dorset and even her *bête noir*, the Cardinal de Rohan, but above all the Comte d'Artois; at the same time still fouler accusations were made with regard to her friendship with the Princesse de Lamballe and Mme de Polignac. Marie Antoinette was now declared to be Catherine de Medicis, Agrippina and Messalina in one!

One has only to glance through the pages of these contemporary pamphlets in order to realize the impotence of her accusers. Unable to make any serious charges, they are reduced to imbecilities which only show how little could be brought against her. The truth is that Marie Antoinette was not even flirtatious; she was *coquette*, which is a very different thing, she understood her *métier de femme*, she charmed and she knew that she charmed, but at the same time she was proud and even austere in her morals. The Comte de Tilly, whilst attributing to her two *tendresses* in a passage that will be referred to later, declares that at least two men fell in love with her, the Vicomte de Noailles and the Duc de Lauzun, 'but she only showed the faintest interest in them.' And Tilly goes on to ask: 'If she had had a decided vocation for gallantry, would she have found it difficult to make a choice in a Court where youth of a remarkable kind was to be found? Her remoteness and her

<sup>1</sup> Flammermont, *Correspondances Diplomatiques*, p. 333.

coldness towards young men was on the contrary the distinctive trait of her character' <sup>1</sup>

This statement with regard to the Duc de Lauzun finds confirmation in the *Mémoires* of Mme Campan, who insinuates that he went so far as to declare his passion. The Duc de Lauzun, she writes, 'asked for an audience. The Queen granted it, as she would have done in the case of any other courtier of his high rank. I was in the next room to the one in which he was received; a few instants after his arrival the Queen opened the door again and said in a loud and angry voice: "Go out, sir! [Sortez, monsieur]." M. de Lauzun bowed deeply and disappeared. The Queen was much agitated, and said to me: "Never shall that man be admitted again to my presence."' <sup>2</sup>

The obvious conclusion that Lauzun had dared to make love to the Queen finds further confirmation in an anecdote told by the Baronne d'Oberkirch which, whether true or not, shows that Lauzun had made himself conspicuous at the Court by his infatuation for the Queen. According to this story Lauzun, in order to make himself remarked by her, followed her everywhere and remained by her door at night like a watchdog. But the Queen took no notice of him. In despair, just as she was entering her carriage to go to Trianon, he fell on one knee presenting the other to her to step on instead of the velvet step provided for the purpose. The Queen, then looking at him for the first time, pretended not to recognize him and called her page, to whom she said: 'Give orders, monsieur, that this boy should be dismissed, he does not even know how to open a carriage door.' <sup>3</sup>

It seems nevertheless evident that Marie Antoinette had at first shown herself gracious to Lauzun, and Mercy refers to this lightly in a letter of December 18, 1776: 'Amongst the giddy people to whom the Queen affords much too free access there is one who is very dangerous through his turbulence and all kinds of bad qualities, it is the Duc de

<sup>1</sup> Comte (Alexandre) de Tilly, *Mémoires* (1828), II 110.

<sup>2</sup> Campan, p 140

<sup>3</sup> Baronne d'Oberkirch, *Mémoires* (1854), I 195

Lauzun,'<sup>1</sup> and Mercy adds that the Queen has agreed with him that the Duke is known to be a bad lot. On January 17, 1777, Mercy writes again that he and the Abbé de Vermond have been trying to open the eyes of the Queen with regard to the people surrounding her. 'We managed to unmask the Duc de Lauzun who is one of the most dangerous, and the Queen has now decided to refuse him any confidence.'<sup>2</sup> The scene in the Queen's cabinet evidently ended the matter as far as Lauzun was concerned, but the incident was turned into a most abominable libel forty-five years later. In 1821, long after the death of Lauzun who, as the Duc de Biron, perished by the guillotine in the Reign of Terror, a brochure was published under the title of *Mémoires de M. le Duc de Lauzun*, in which the supposed author relates how he became a favourite of Marie Antoinette. 'The Queen,' he writes, 'seldom went out without me, would not allow me to leave the Court . . . always made me sit by her at the gaming-table, talked to me incessantly, came every evening to Mme de Guéménée's and showed temper if there were enough people there to interrupt her continual pre-occupation with me.' Finally, he gives his version of the interview in the 'golden cabinet' of the Queen's *petits appartements*, saying he asked her permission to appear less frequently at Court for fear of the scandal caused by his favour. Marie Antoinette is then represented as begging him not to abandon her: 'She held out her hand, I kissed it ardently several times . . . she leant tenderly towards me, she was in my arms . . . I pressed her to my heart,' etc. "'Go away," she said at last, "this conversation has lasted long enough." I made a deep bow and withdrew.'

The publication of these *Mémoires* evoked the deepest disgust, and Talleyrand, who had been the friend of Lauzun, at once declared them to be spurious. Their authenticity has now been generally accepted, and it is evident that Lauzun really wrote something of the kind, for both d'Allonville and Mme Campan speak of a MS. by him in circula-

<sup>1</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, II. 539.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, III. 8.

tion, defamatory to the Queen. But another author seems to have been concerned in their publication, and the famous bibliographer Quérard regards them as having been largely fabricated by him. 'The *Mémoires of Lauzun*,' he says, 'are a pamphlet against Marie Antoinette. The man who is supposed to have written them is one of the three or four serious favourites attributed to this unhappy Queen. This publication is by order of date one of the first literary frauds of this century, for it had been attempted under the Imperial Government.' At that date the press was no longer free, and the manuscript had to be submitted to the head of the police, who, thinking it unfit for publication, referred the matter to Napoleon. The Emperor, having read it, was indignant. 'What,' he said, 'is it not enough for these wretches to have made that unhappy woman mount the scaffold, but they must also defile her memory! What do the authors of this pamphlet want? Money? Let it be given them and let this filth not see the light.' But to the shame of the Comte de Provence, after he had become Louis XVIII, its publication was permitted. Quérard adds: 'The principal author of these *Mémoires* is a man who has more than once concerned himself with defiling the most eminent names of France, the Jew and libellist Lewis Goldsmith.'<sup>1</sup>

So much for the *Mémoires of Lauzun*, which modern writers have dared to quote as serious evidence against Marie Antoinette. But if the Duc de Lauzun was not entirely responsible for the posthumous libel attributed to him, it seems probable that in his lifetime he liked to pose as a favourite of the Queen's. The same pretension seems to have been made even by the old Swiss Besenval, in whose supposed *Mémoires* it is suggested that Marie Antoinette felt a *tendresse* for him. Here again Mme Campan enlightens us as to what really took place. The Baron, finding himself alone with the Queen, lost his head and fell on his knees, declaring his love for her. 'Get up, monsieur,' said Marie

<sup>1</sup> Quérard, *Les Supercheries Littéraires* (1847), II. 545.



Antoinette, 'the King will know nothing of an offence which would disgrace you for ever,' and she went out of the room, leaving the Baron pale and trembling.

It is evident that the beauty of Marie Antoinette proved disturbing to the minds of several men in her entourage, but they knew better than to betray their feelings. The Prince de Ligne, who knew her intimately, wrote of her in a famous passage :

'Her supposed gallantry was never more than a deep feeling of friendship shown perhaps to one or two people in particular, and the general *coquetterie* of a woman and a queen wishing to please everyone. At a time when youth and inexperience might have led us to be too much at our ease with her, there was never one amongst those of us who had the happiness of seeing her every day who would have dared to take advantage of it by the least want of decorum; she played the queen unconsciously and they adored her without dreaming of loving her.' <sup>1</sup>

Elsewhere the Prince admits, however, that at one moment he himself fell in love with her, but he has the chivalry to own that he found himself defeated. Maria Theresa had disapproved of her daughter's friendship with the witty Belgian, whom she regarded as too irresponsible to be admitted to her intimacy, and the Prince de Ligne relates what took place with charming naïveté :

'Who could have seen the unfortunate Queen every day without adoring her?

'I realized this when she said to me: "My mother thinks it wrong you should be so long at Versailles. Go and spend a few days with your regiment. Write letters in Vienna so that it should be known you are there, and then come back!" This kindness, this delicacy and still more the thought of spending a fortnight away from her brought tears to my eyes, that her pretty thoughtlessness, which was a hundred miles from gallantry, prevented her noticing. As I do not

<sup>1</sup> Prince de Ligne, *Pensées et Lettres*, publiées par la Baronne de Stael-Holstein (Barrière, 1890), p. 26.

believe in passions that one knows can never be reciprocated, a fortnight cured me of what I now admit to myself for the first time, and which I should never have confessed to anyone for fear of being laughed at.' <sup>1</sup>

To turn to Montjoie, whom the Queen's page, the Comte d'Hézecques, describes as 'one of the most truthful authors of our time,' we find in his *Histoire de Marie Antoinette*, which has now become very rare, the following passage:

'If one wishes to discover the prime cause of the misfortunes of this princess, we must seek them in the passions of which the Court was the hotbed and in the corruption of her century. If I had seen otherwise I would say so with sincerity, but I affirm that after having seen everything, heard everything, and read everything, I am convinced that the morals of Marie Antoinette were as pure as those of her virtuous husband.' <sup>2</sup>

The English contemporary historian, William Playfair, came to the same conclusion when he set out to prove: 'as far as probable evidence can go, that the Queen of France was totally irreproachable on the subject of fidelity to the marriage-bed.' <sup>3</sup>

John Adolphus, in his *Biographical Memoirs of the French Revolution*, published in 1799, vehemently denounced the calumnies and 'unfounded insinuations' made against Marie Antoinette, observing that their source need only be examined in order to show that they are 'destitute of proof.' <sup>4</sup> That able and highly documented writer, John Wilson Croker, born in 1780, whose *Essays on the French Revolution*, for which he had gleaned the materials through his personal investigations in Paris, provide the most accurate account of events given by any English contemporary, thus sums up the result of his researches:

'We have followed the history of Marie Antoinette with the greatest diligence and scrupulosity. We have lived in those times. We have talked with some of her friends and

<sup>1</sup> Prince de Ligne, *Mémoires*, pp 67, 68.

<sup>2</sup> Vol. 1. p 107.

<sup>3</sup> *History of Jacobinism* (1795), p. 586.

<sup>4</sup> Vol. i. p. 18.

some of her enemies; we have read, certainly not *all*, but hundreds of the libels written against her; and we have, in short, examined her life with—if we may be allowed to say so of ourselves—something of the accuracy of contemporaries, the diligence of inquirers, and the impartiality of historians, all combined; and we feel it our duty to declare, in as solemn a manner as literature admits of, our well-matured opinion that every reproach against the morals of the Queen was a gross calumny—that she was, as we have said, one of the purest of human beings.’<sup>1</sup>

It would be easy to multiply quotations of this kind, the Baron d’Aubier, the Baron de Frénilly, the Comte d’Haussonville all dismiss the stories of the Queen’s ‘gallantries’ as fables unworthy of the least attention, and the evidence of such contemporaries should go far to refute the recently revived legend of the Comte de Fersen as the lover of Marie Antoinette. But since at the period dealt with in this chapter Fersen had not yet reappeared upon the scene, that question must be reserved until later.

<sup>1</sup> Page 562.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE VISIT OF THE EMPEROR

THOSE years of 1775 to 1778 filled Mercy and Maria Theresa with alarm for the future of Marie Antoinette. Whither was she drifting? Where would it end—this round of dressing, dancing, gambling, masquerading, turning night into day? Mercy's letters to the Empress, to her chancellor the Prince de Kaunitz, and to Marie Antoinette's brother, the Emperor Joseph II, are filled with forebodings. Mercy had remonstrated with the Queen in vain, pointing out to her the danger of forsaking the King's society for her new friends, striving to unmask the true character of her 'favourites,' none of whom he believes are sincerely devoted to her. The Abbé de Vermond also tries his hand, telling her with the utmost frankness what he thinks of Mme de Polignac, whose moral lapses she overlooks 'simply because she is amiable.'<sup>1</sup> 'You have become very indulgent with regard to the morals and reputations of your friends, both men and women. I could show you that at your age, this indulgence, especially when shown to women, has a bad effect,' etc. The poor Abbé is so distressed that he asks to resign his post. 'I am consumed,' he writes to Maria Theresa, 'with the idea of the troubles the Queen may be preparing for herself.'<sup>2</sup>

Marie Antoinette listens gently to their reproaches, smiles, promises to follow their good advice, but then gets drawn back into the whirlpool. 'One must enjoy oneself whilst one is young,' she says to Mercy, 'the time for reflection will come and frivolities will vanish.'<sup>3</sup>

The old Prince de Kaunitz understood this. Whilst Maria Theresa and Joseph II judge her severely in their letters,

<sup>1</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, II 490

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, II 510

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, III. 25

he shows himself more human. 'We are very young,' he writes, 'and I am afraid we shall be for a long while still.'<sup>1</sup>

Yet Marie Antoinette was not at heart frivolous, still less was she dissipated in the English sense of the word. Compared with that of the modern society woman, her life was austere. She ate sparingly and never touched wine, drinking only water at her meals. The luxuries considered *de rigueur* to-day were unknown in her time. If she dashed at pleasure it was because it was the only way by which her ardent vital nature could find a vent. But it did not satisfy her. A really frivolous woman would have been perfectly satisfied with this life of amusement, with the consciousness of being always exquisitely dressed, and with the admiration she excited at every turn; to Marie Antoinette all this was only an empty consolation for the real happiness she craved.

Why had her family not come to the rescue at the outset? Why, when Mercy's complaints began to be serious in 1775, did none of them try to find out for themselves what had caused this change in her character? Why, instead of harping on the necessity for a Dauphin, did not Maria Theresa herself set out for Versailles and discover in conversation with her daughter what was the obstacle to this desirable event? But they contented themselves with remonstrating, lecturing, predicting disaster which they did nothing practical to avert.

Joseph II, moreover, had allowed himself to be prejudiced against his sister by a man who was to prove one of her most dangerous enemies—the Cardinal de Rohan. This dissolute prince of the Church, whom Maria Theresa detested, had written a gratuitously disparaging report of Marie Antoinette immediately after her marriage, saying that her natural tendency to coquetry would make things easy for a lover.<sup>2</sup> This accusation, endorsed by no one else at that date, came oddly from an ecclesiastic whose immorality was notorious and who travelled about with his mistress disguised as a young abbé.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, it

<sup>1</sup> *Mercy et Joseph II*, II 490 Letter of March 4, 1777.

<sup>2</sup> Besenval, *Mémoires*, II. 165

<sup>3</sup> Lescure, *Correspondance Secrète*, i. 229.

Spartan character Joseph II affected. Posing as a model sovereign, despising the ease and luxury indulged in by the Kings of France, he insisted on travelling as the Comte de Falckenstein, and strict injunctions were given to Mercy that nothing must be allowed 'to upset the edifice of his incognito.' In keeping with this scheme he stipulated that whilst at Versailles he would accept no apartment at the château or the Petit Trianon pertaining to the Court or royal family, instead he would occupy two rooms at furnished lodgings in the town, where he would sleep on his camp bed with a bearskin for a mattress.

Marie Antoinette had looked forward to this visit with mixed feelings. Often home-sick, she longed for the sight of one of her own people, but she dreaded the lecturing this brother, older than herself by fourteen years, was sure to give her and which, she felt uneasily, would not be altogether undeserved. Maria Theresa also felt doubtful as to the way the Emperor would carry out his mission, either he would be won over by his sister's pretty teasing ways and flattered by the charm of her conversation, or he would exasperate her by his lecturings. The Prince de Kaunitz, fearing the latter possibility, drew up an elaborate plan of campaign according to which the Emperor was to assume an attitude of perfect friendliness, avoiding all vexed topics, and only at the last moment, on the eve of his departure, deliver a carefully thought out sermon in a tone of tender solicitude.

Armed with these instructions, Joseph II set out in a post-chaise at a quarter-past eight in the morning following his arrival in Paris, and reached Versailles at half-past nine. In accordance with his plan of incognito he was met at the entrance to the château by the Abbé de Vermond, who led him by a hidden staircase up to the Queen's *petits appartements* so as to avoid the crowd of people collected in the great antechamber to see him pass. This first meeting was far from formidable, the brother and sister kissed each other silently with tears, then both burst out laughing and began

to talk in German. Soon the Emperor was paying delightful compliments, saying that if only he could find anyone as charming as his sister he would not hesitate to marry again. Encouraged by this unexpected affability, Marie Antoinette started to confide in him, told him of her troubles, confessed her follies—her losses at cards, her frivolities, the society she now frequented. To all this the Emperor replied discreetly, faithful to his instructions not to dispel the friendly atmosphere by a lecture; the time for that had not yet come. After two hours of conversation, the Queen, taking her brother by the arm, led him to the King's apartments. The two monarchs embraced. It was noticed as they stood side by side that Louis XVI was the taller of the two and no less good to look at.<sup>1</sup> Then came a round of visits to all the royal family and to the King's Ministers Maurepas and Vergennes.

After this followed dinner, taken under curious conditions. The table was laid in the Queen's state bedchamber and three armchairs were placed at it for the King, Queen and Emperor. But Joseph II, true to his rôle of Spartan, declined this luxury and insisted on occupying a folding-stool (*pliant*); whereupon Louis XVI good-humouredly declared that he and the Queen would do the same. Accordingly the armchairs were removed; the King and Queen seated themselves at one side of the table with their backs to the bed, Joseph II took his place opposite them. Owing to the Emperor's early arrival and the time occupied in paying ceremonial visits, Marie Antoinette had not been able to finish her toilette or her coiffure, and the royal trio presented an odd spectacle uncomfortably perched on their three stools at the table, the Emperor in black, the King in violet—as mourning for the King of Portugal—whilst the Queen was in *deshabille* with her hair only half dressed, which did not show her to advantage. Louis XVI was at his best on this occasion, laughing and at his ease, whilst Joseph II hunched up on his seat looked respectfully embarrassed.

<sup>1</sup> *Journal du Duc de Croÿ* (1907), IV. 8.

A more convivial meal took place two days later with the Comtes and Comtesses de Provence and d'Artois, for after leaving the table the three young princes, still only boys of nineteen to twenty-two, started to romp about the room and fling themselves on to sofas, much to the embarrassment of their wives and the surprise of the Emperor. Joseph II, however, accommodating himself to circumstances, soon assumed the rôle of a father to this irresponsible family, giving them advice in turns, telling the Comte d'Artois how to become a really great man, urging the King to cultivate the art of conversation by practice talks with Maurepas, reproving him for not having seen the sights of Paris. By way of example—and also in order to satisfy his eager thirst for information—Joseph II himself set out on a tour of inspection, visiting museums, academies, factories, printing-presses, institutions, calling on scientists, philosophers, authors and even Mme du Barry.

During these expeditions the Emperor made himself immensely popular by his dress and manners. Wearing a plain brown coat and followed by two lackeys in grey, he would walk about the streets of Paris and go into shops to make his purchases like any bourgeois. He liked to lose himself in a crowd and be taken for a man of the people. This hatred of ceremonial and contempt for etiquette that had been so blamed in Marie Antoinette was applauded in her brother by the illogical Parisians.

But in the intervals of sight-seeing he found time for long and earnest talks with the King and Queen. Disregarding the plan of campaign sketched out for him by Kaunitz, he held forth to Marie Antoinette on the error of her ways, on her passion for amusement, her taste for gambling, on the danger of the friends by whom she had surrounded herself, drawing a terrible picture of all the future held in store for her. Marie Antoinette listened attentively, promising that in time she would follow his wise counsels.

This would have been all to the good if only he had kept to the same line of dignified remonstrance on matters of real



importance. But Joseph II, who was a terrible prig, could not help parading his superiority or assuming the patronizing air of an elder brother. Forgetting that his sister was no longer the little girl he had known in Vienna, to be teased and taken to task for childish follies, but a woman of twenty-one and the Queen of France, he was tactless enough to laugh at her before other people for her dress and coiffures. One morning, it is said, the Emperor was present at her toilette, a ceremony attended by a number of Court personages. The Queen had on her head a quantity of flowers and feathers, and turning to her brother said gaily: 'Do you not think my headdress ravishing?'

'Yes.'

'That "yes" is very dry. Do you think then that it does not become me?'

'*Ma foi*, Madame, if you wish me to speak frankly, I think it very fragile to bear a crown.'<sup>1</sup>

Another day when the Queen was putting on her rouge, which in those days was *de rigueur*, but which on this occasion she applied rather freely because she was going to the theatre, the Emperor, indicating a lady in the room who was still more highly coloured, said sarcastically:

'A little more, under the eyes, put it on furiously like Madame.'<sup>2</sup>

Marie Antoinette, who had borne his rudeness patiently hitherto, now asked her brother to cease his pleasantries, or at any rate to spare her when there were other people present.

Yet in spite of gaucheries the Emperor's visit did not prove fruitless. In the course of those long intimate talks with the King and Queen the matter of their conjugal relations was freely discussed; Louis XVI himself confided in his brother-in-law, spoke of his affection for the Queen and of his own great desire to have children<sup>3</sup>. On this point Joseph II was able to give the right advice which eventually led to the

<sup>1</sup> Lescure, *Correspondance Secrète*, i 61.

<sup>2</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, iii 66, 74

<sup>3</sup> Campan, p 145

consummation so devoutly hoped for without recourse being made to the much talked of operation.<sup>1</sup>

The Emperor had thus accomplished the most important part of his mission; the final lecture still, however, remained to be given. Rather than deliver it  *viva voce*  in the tone of tender eloquence prescribed by the Prince de Kaunitz, Joseph II decided to put it in writing, and on the eve of his departure handed his sister a lengthy sermon entitled, 'Reflections given to the Queen of France,'<sup>2</sup> over which she was to meditate at her leisure. Marie Antoinette, softened at the thought of parting with this brother, whom, for all his brusqueness, she loved sincerely, accepted the homily with gratitude. 'I will confess to my dear mother,' she wrote to the Empress, 'that he gave me something for which I had asked and which has given me the greatest pleasure, that is, written advice which he has left with me. This will make my principal reading at the present time.'<sup>3</sup> We seem to hear again the good little Dauphine of the pre-Polignac era, frankly admitting her faults, anxious to correct them, full of excellent resolutions for the future.

The Emperor himself had recognized the natural uprightness of her character, whilst underestimating her mental qualities. 'The Queen,' he wrote to his brother Leopold on April 29th, 'is a pretty woman but a feather-head, who cannot yet make the most of her advantages and lets herself be drawn into running about all day from one amusement to another, in which there is nothing that is not absolutely permissible [*il n'y en a que de très licites*], but which is none the less dangerous because it prevents her giving time to thought, of which she has so much need.'<sup>4</sup> A fortnight later he writes again: 'She only thinks of amusing herself; she has no feeling for the King; she is intoxicated by the dissipations of this country.' But he goes on to say: 'Her

<sup>1</sup> Flammermont, *Correspondances Diplomatiques*, p. 105. Letter of von der Goltz to Frederick II, September 7, 1777.

<sup>2</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, III 82.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, III. 48.

<sup>4</sup> *Maria Theresia und Joseph II.*, II 131.

virtue is intact, she is even austere by nature rather than by reason. So far so good then.' <sup>1</sup>

On June the 9th, after leaving Paris, the Emperor writes, however, in a kindlier vein:

'She is a good and amiable woman, rather young and thoughtless but with a foundation of kindness and virtue which is estimable in her position. Added to this, she has a cleverness and rightness of perception which has often astonished me. Her first impulse is always the right one; if only she followed it, reflected a little more and listened less to the people who prompt her—of which there are armies of all kinds—she would be perfect.' <sup>2</sup>

To his mother, Joseph II wrote still more warmly:

'I left Versailles with sorrow, really attached to my sister; I found there the charm of life which I had renounced and for which I see now that the taste had never left me; she is amiable and charming, I spent hours with her, not noticing how they sped. She felt the parting deeply but bore up, I needed all my strength to tear myself away.' <sup>3</sup>

In all the correspondence of Mercy, in all the conversations between Joseph II and his sister and in the long sermon he left with her, in all his letters to the Empress and his brothers, there is no question, not a hint, of even the mildest flirtation. In saying, however, that Marie Antoinette had no feeling for the King, the Emperor clearly exaggerates. It is easy to imagine that, exasperated by the unsatisfactory conditions of her marriage, she may have spoken of her husband with impatience during her conversations with her brother. But she herself writes to her mother just after his departure: 'At the moment of parting [with the Emperor] when I was most in despair, the King showed me attentions and a studied tenderness such as I shall never forget all my life, and would make me attached to him if I were not so already.' <sup>4</sup>

Joseph II seems to have failed to understand the real

<sup>1</sup> *Maria Theresia und Joseph II.*, II, 134

<sup>2</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, III, 86.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 138

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 48

character of Louis XVI still more than that of Marie Antoinette. 'This man,' he wrote in his usual tone of superiority to his brother Leopold, 'is rather weak, but by no means imbecile; he has ideas and judgement but an apathy of body as of mind. He talks sensibly and has no curiosity or desire to learn, in a word the *fiat lux* has not come yet. . . .'<sup>1</sup>

Even Mercy is led to protest at this: 'The Emperor perceived in the King all the faults of his education, but I think he has judged him rather too severely from the point of view of his moral qualities and of his aptitude.'<sup>2</sup>

Considering what we know of the King's attainments, his knowledge of languages, his passion for geography, his prodigious memory, the Emperor's judgement of him was obviously unjust. Too modest to parade his learning, Louis XVI appeared less brilliant than his brother-in-law, yet showed himself his superior in common-sense. Joseph II's criticisms of the rest of the royal family were, however, still more sweeping.

The Sardinian ambassador, the Comte de Viry, in his report of the Emperor's visit, followed his usual plan of comparing Marie Antoinette unfavourably with her sisters-in-law. The Emperor whilst at Versailles, he declares, had only seemed happy when he was with Madame (the Comtesse de Provence) or the three aunts. Madame Adélaïde had certainly done her best to win him over. The inveterate enemy of Austria, she had nevertheless drawn him aside into a private salon on the pretext of showing him some pictures, and once alone proceeded to embrace him, saying that this must be permitted to an old aunt. Joseph II, whilst submitting to these endearments, formed his own opinion, which he expressed later in a letter to his brother:

'Monsieur [the Comte de Provence], he wrote, 'is an undefinable being, better looking than the King but mortally cold. Madame [the Comtesse de Provence], coarse and ugly, is not a Piedmontaise for nothing, and full of intrigues. . . .

<sup>1</sup> *Maria Theresia und Joseph II.*, II 139

<sup>2</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, III 78.

The Comte d'Artois is a fop in every way. His wife, who is the only one to produce children, is absolutely imbecile. . . . Mesdames [the aunts] are null—good people who no longer count for anything.’<sup>1</sup>

So much for the charm which, according to the Comte de Viry, the Emperor had found in the society of Madame and of Mesdames Tantes.

Needless to say, the mission of Joseph II to the Court of France, which, as everyone knew, had for its objects a strengthening of the Franco-Austrian alliance and the establishment of normal relations between the King and Queen, seriously alarmed those who, like the Comte de Provence and the King of Prussia, dreaded nothing so much as that Marie Antoinette should give an heir to the throne of France. On the 16th of December 1776, Frederick the Great had written hopefully to his faithful ambassador von der Goltz about the continued coldness between the King and Queen, but the projected visit of Joseph II, then arranged for January 1777, threw him into a fever of apprehension. On December 26 he sends von der Goltz elaborate instructions on the best methods for preventing any rapprochement between Versailles and Vienna.

‘As regards the journey of the Emperor, it will certainly take place this time in spite of all that is said to the contrary, and it is positively fixed for the course of next month. . . . Meanwhile, it will be a good thing if you can by underground insinuations increase the dissension between the two Courts. To this effect, the ambitious views of His Imperial Majesty on Italy, Bavaria, Silesia, Alsace and even Moldavia will open a vast field to your political work, and if you further add the sarcasms which the prince permitted himself to make on his three brothers-in-law by saying: “I have three brothers-in-law who are pitiable, the one at Versailles is an imbecile, the one at Naples is a madman and the one at Parma is a fool,” they could not fail to strike home and to prejudice the Court at which you are, in such a way that all under-

<sup>1</sup> *Maria Theresia und Joseph II*, II, 134.

standing would be extremely difficult and perhaps impossible. But it goes without saying, and you will feel it yourself, that these sort of insinuations require extreme precautions in order to slip them in skilfully without anyone suspecting whence they come, so that you will have to bring all your sagacity to bear on this commission in order to execute it well.'

The postponement of the Emperor's visit naturally overjoyed Frederick, but his triumph was short-lived, for the journey was now arranged to take place in April. On March 20, 1777 he writes again discussing the possibilities of a rapprochement between Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, and now puts forward a new idea that has just occurred to him: 'If only the Ministry could give the King some taste for mistresses it would be a certain way of keeping the Queen on one side and preventing her for ever from seizing the reins of government.' Frederick wonders why no one has thought of this before.<sup>1</sup>

It is not without significance to find Mercy writing a few weeks later—on April 16—that 'in this perverse whirlpool of the Court there exist wretches who are secretly meditating on the plan of leading the King into libertinism; I know that more than one person has dared to speak to him about an actress of the Comédie Française named Contat.'<sup>2</sup> These horrible attempts have produced no effect, and I am morally certain that they never will, nevertheless the Queen must be on the watch, and I have not left her in ignorance of what I am revealing here.'<sup>3</sup>

Von der Goltz would thus seem to have carried out Frederick's instructions to let no one suspect whence certain insinuations came with all the sagacity required of him. For Mercy does not appear to have detected amidst all this web of intrigue the hand of 'the bad neighbour' to whom Maria Theresa refers in her correspondence.

<sup>1</sup> Flammermont, *Correspondances Diplomatiques*, pp 100, 102.

<sup>2</sup> Louise Contat, a most attractive woman, created the rôle of Suzanne in the *Mariage de Figaro* seven years later.

<sup>3</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, iii. 43

The vile project referred to, though unsuccessful at this juncture, was not abandoned, for two years later Mercy reports that the same attempts are being made 'to work on the mind of the King,' so as to draw him into 'amorous intrigues,' and he adds: 'I have not yet been able to discover from what subterranean passage these machinations start.' But Louis XVI was proof against all such temptations and hastened to reassure Marie Antoinette, who had been distressed by the rumours that had reached her. 'In a conversation she had with this monarch on the 4th of this month,' Mercy writes on June 17, 1779, 'he spoke to his august consort in an infinitely cordial and tender manner, saying amongst other things that he loved her with all his heart and that he could swear to her he had never had the least feeling or sentiment for any woman, but for her alone.' <sup>1</sup>

Throughout his whole life Louis XVI remained true to this one devotion, and never in that hot-bed of scandal at Versailles or in the underworld of Paris where later every other conceivable accusation was hurled against him, did the tongue of calumny dare to impugn his absolute fidelity to Marie Antoinette.

This great affection, which had shown itself only intermittently up to 1777, now after the visit of Joseph II became constant, even ardent: 'from that happy moment so long awaited,' says Mme Campan, 'the attachment of the King to the Queen took on all the character of love.' His naïf letters to the Emperor show the warmest gratitude for the good advice given to the royal pair. 'I hope,' he writes, 'that next year will not go by without my giving you a nephew or niece,' and after confidences of an intimate nature, he adds: 'It is to you we owe this happiness, for since your journey all has been for the best. . .', <sup>2</sup>

By way of distracting the King from affairs of State, the Queen this August gave a charming fête at Trianon. The

<sup>1</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, III 322, 323

<sup>2</sup> Comte de Pimodan, *Le Comte de Mercy Argenteau* (1911), p 171.

garden was turned into a fair at which the ladies of the Court held stalls, Marie Antoinette herself acted as 'limonadière' in a café, and numbers of shopkeepers were brought down from Paris to display their wares in the avenues of the château. Throughout this fête, says the author of the *Correspondance Secrète*, 'courtiers observed moments of joy, then of tenderness between the King and Queen, and it was said that the evening ended with an impassioned scene of which France would see the happy effects in nine months' time.' <sup>1</sup>

But these hopes were not immediately realized. Serene in the belief that the great desire of her heart was at last to be given her, the Queen had made excellent resolutions, had vowed to God that if He would give her a child she would cease from follies and become serious at last, but after a few months this happiness seemed as far away as ever.

It was then that a reaction set in. Hope deferred maketh the heart sick, and Marie Antoinette, disappointed once more, threw herself again into a whirl of excitement. The high play she had promised her brother to renounce began again. 'I have reason to think,' Mercy writes sadly, 'that the rules of conduct written by his Majesty [the Emperor] have been done away with and thrown into the fire.' <sup>2</sup> In her bitterness she even turned at one moment against the King, blaming him for the frustration of her hopes.

All the while amusement palled on her. On November 19, 1777, Mercy reports to Maria Theresa that the Queen is tired of racing, that she thoroughly disapproves of the Comte d'Artois, that she has admitted to him after a gay week at Fontainebleau that she had not really enjoyed herself, and that a feeling of ennui 'had outweighed that of pleasure.' <sup>3</sup> On the same day Mercy writes to Joseph II:

'From my talks with the Queen it is more than ever evident to me that this august princess is very well aware of the objections to her present manner of life, but the need

<sup>1</sup> Vol. i. p. 93    <sup>2</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, iii. 121.    <sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, iii. 133, 136.



for distraction makes her seize on anything that will provide this. Yet by judgement and character the Queen would reject what is most dangerous if she were not perpetually drawn into it by the Comte d'Artois and the Duc de Chartres [later Philippe d'Orléans Egalité], who are the most terrible instigators of disorder and a real scourge for this Court.' <sup>1</sup>

The carnival of 1778 found the Queen again at the masked balls of the Opera, though, as Mercy explains, always accompanied by the Comte or Comtesse de Provence, and giving no occasion for remark. 'Her Majesty walked about the ball giving one arm to Monsieur and the other to a lady-in-waiting, she was followed by an officer of the body-guard and deigned to hold conversation with those people known to her whom she met.' Mercy adds that she offered the King to give up these balls and spend the evenings quietly with him, but the King, anxious she should be amused, declined. 'Thus reciprocity of attentions and of mutual consideration for each other is now more than ever established, and there reigns between them an ease and friendliness from which the Queen could draw all imaginable advantages' if she would fix her attention on really solid and useful things. This is the more desirable since, as Mercy says, 'she has a great facility for understanding serious subjects and of judging those who touch on them.' <sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile she allowed herself to be drawn into the vortex of pleasure to still the grief that gnawed at her heart.

<sup>1</sup> *Mercy et Joseph II*, II, 514.

<sup>2</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, III, 176.

## CHAPTER X

### A DREAM COMES TRUE

AFTER all, Marie Antoinette had despaired too soon. The happiness for which she had longed throughout those empty years was to be given her. In the spring of 1778 there came that wonderful day of April 19, when she was able to tell her mother that at last, at last she was expecting a child. Even at this distance of time, even from the printed page, one feels the glow of joy that filled the young Queen's heart as she took up her pen to write these words:

'Madame my dear mother, my first impulse, which I regret not having followed a week ago, was to write my hopes to my dear mother. I was checked by the fear of causing too much grief if my great hopes had faded away. . . .'<sup>1</sup>

At first it seemed too good to be true that this experience she had lived through so often and so vainly in imagination was now a reality. 'There are still moments when I think it is all only a dream, but the dream goes on and I think there is no more room for doubt.'<sup>2</sup>

Louis XVI too was overjoyed. His character, says Mme Campan, had changed entirely, the affection and consideration he now showed the Queen made up for all the apparent indifference of the past. 'Never could anyone have seen a husband and wife happier and more united.'

Marie Antoinette's life was changed also; gone was the craving for excitement; instead, the Queen went out only for gentle walks in the park of Versailles, and spent long quiet hours in the *petits appartements* with her most intimate friends, passing the time with conversation, music and fine needlework.

<sup>1</sup> *Marie Therèse et Mercy*, iii. 186.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, iii. 200.

Already she was turning over in her eager mind wonderful plans for the way the Dauphin—of course it must be a Dauphin!—was to be brought up. With what pride and new-found importance she tells them to the Empress! No longer the humble and dejected daughter admitting the failure of her hopes, but the modern young mother versed in all the latest ideas on infant welfare about which it is now her turn to instruct her mother:

‘In the way they are brought up nowadays they are much less constricted, they are not swaddled [*emmaillotés*], they are always in a light cradle or carried in one’s arms, and as soon as they can be in the open air one accustoms them to it by degrees and they end by being in it nearly all the time. I think it is the best and healthiest way of bringing them up. Mine will be lodged downstairs with a little railing separating him from the rest of the terrace, which may teach him to walk even earlier than on parquets.’<sup>1</sup>

Amidst such happy dreams as these Marie Antoinette passed all the summer. Only the first ripples of that tide of calumny which was one day to overwhelm her came to disturb her peace. It happened that the weather this year was unusually hot, throughout the whole of July and August not a single storm had cooled the air. The Queen, unable to take much exercise, found it refreshing to walk after dark on the terrace of the château before going to bed. This habit had been followed by the whole Court in the preceding summer, from ten o’clock onwards the terrace was illuminated with fairy lights and an orchestra in the Orangerie played light music. According to the democratic custom of the old régime by which the public were admitted into the gardens and even into the palaces of the Kings, the townspeople of Versailles were allowed to attend these nightly promenades and even to crowd on to the terrace of the château. The Queen and her sisters-in-law, dressed in white cambric with large straw hats and muslin veils, after the simple fashion which had now come into vogue, walked up

<sup>1</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, III 213.

and down listening to the music or sat on the seats arranged along the terrace. It was then that on one or two occasions people came and sat down by them, and the three princesses, thinking they were unrecognized behind their veils, merely thought this amusing. Once, however, a young man attempted to make conversation, and Marie Antoinette, still imagining that he did not know to whom he was speaking, talked to him for a few moments before rising with her sisters-in-law and moving away. This sort of thing was enough to give cause for scandal and every kind of story was told about the Queen's nocturnal walks.

'It was thus,' says the Prince de Ligne, 'that they spoilt our charming and innocent nights on the terrace of Versailles, which looked like Opera balls. We listened to conversation, we were taken in and took in other people; I gave my arm to the Queen, her gaiety was charming. Sometimes we had music in the groves of the Orangerie where high up in a niche there is a bust of Louis XIV. M. le Comte d'Artois said to it sometimes: "Bonjour, Grandpapa!" One night, I had planned with the Queen to stand behind the statue and answer him, but the fear that they would not give me a ladder to get down by and would leave me up there all night made me give up this plan. . . . Many reasons and spiteful remarks led to this pastime being given up, for apparently it is ordained that one can never amuse oneself at the Court.' <sup>1</sup>

So the summer months went by quietly, uneventfully; Marie Antoinette had now abandoned the giddy whirl so completely that Maria Theresa grew alarmed lest she should become melancholy. She hears that she has given up going to theatres and has countermanded a fête at Trianon—all this 'does her honour.' <sup>2</sup>

At last the month of December came and the birth of the royal infant was daily expected. Louis XVI, delighted at the prospect, could not show Marie Antoinette enough

<sup>1</sup> Prince de Ligne, *Mémoires* (1860), p. 73.

<sup>2</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, III. 233.

attention, 'going to her *appartement* ten times a day to ask how she was and never ceasing to question the doctors and the accoucheur.'<sup>1</sup>

In the early morning of December 19 the Queen felt the first pains. According to the strange custom that prevailed at the Court of France, not only were the princes and princesses of the blood and those who had 'the honours' of the Court allowed to be present, but the public were freely admitted and poured into the room in such numbers that there was hardly space to move. The King, who had foreseen this emergency, had taken the precaution to have the large tapestry screens surrounding the bed fastened with cords so that they could not be overthrown by the pressure of the crowd, but the air soon became unbreathable and the Queen's life was declared to be in danger. Louis XVI, whose great physical strength was reinforced by his fears for her safety, thereupon tore open the windows, which had been pasted up to keep out the winter draughts. At the same moment Vermond, the accoucheur, hastily resorted to 'bleeding,' the remedy that in the eighteenth century was applied for every conceivable ill and in this case proved effectual. The crowd were hustled out of the room and the Queen recovered consciousness.

According to some accounts the sudden collapse on the part of Marie Antoinette was caused by the shock of seeing, by a sign arranged with the Princesse de Lamballe, that she had not given birth to a Dauphin. But she recovered quickly from her disappointment, and as the baby princess was handed to her, she took her in her arms, saying fondly: 'Poor little thing, you were not wished for but you will be none the less dear to me. A son would have belonged more particularly to the State, you will be mine, you will have all my care, you will share my happiness and assuage my griefs.'

Louis XVI, on his part, showed no sign of disappointment; in the seventh heaven of happiness at finding himself

<sup>1</sup> Lescure, *Correspondance Secrète*, 1. 250.

a father, his affection and tenderness for the Queen knew no bounds. Although outdoor exercise was always necessary to his health, he did not go outside the château for a whole week, even to take the shortest walk. When the Queen woke in the morning he was the first at her bedside, where he remained part of the morning, returned several times in the afternoon, and spent the whole evening.<sup>1</sup> In the intervals he would go and stand beside the cot of the baby princess, looking with wonder at her charming little face with the large blue eyes, the pretty mouth and regular features, and when one day her tiny hand closed around his finger he felt all the thrill that many a humbler father has experienced at this first appeal to the paternal instinct. ('Il en fut dans un ravissement qui ne pouvait se rendre.')<sup>2</sup>

But the happiness of the King and Queen was not shared by all the world of Versailles. The Comte de Provence, seeing his position as heir-apparent threatened, had difficulty in concealing his mortification. In a letter to Gustavus III of Sweden, two months before the birth of Madame Royale, he made no secret of it. 'You have heard,' he wrote, 'of the change that has taken place in my fortunes . . . I have throughout controlled myself outwardly and behaved in the same way as before, without showing any joy which could have seemed like hypocrisy and would have been so, for, frankly, as you can easily imagine, I felt none at all. . . . My inward feelings have been more difficult to conquer and still rise up at times.'<sup>3</sup>

It is said indeed that they rose up to the point of leading the Comte de Provence to question the legitimacy of the Queen's children; at any rate it was from his entourage and that of his wife that the most scandalous rumours emanated. The new Sardinian ambassador, the Comte de Scarnafis, who had succeeded the Comte de Viry, retails the same sort of gossip that his predecessor had gleaned in Madame's salon. On January 13, 1778, Scarnafis repeats

<sup>1</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, iii 285.

<sup>2</sup> Rochetene, i. 395.

<sup>3</sup> A. Geffroy, *Gustave III et la Cour de France*, i. 294.

more stories about the Duc de Coigny, for whom the Queen 'is suspected of having a taste,' though he adds: 'In all that I have put before the eyes of your Majesty there is nothing very authenticated, and these are only conjectures and suspicions which exist among certain people of the royal family and of the Court.'

The Queen's condition four months later naturally infuriated the Comtesse de Provence no less than her husband, and on May 19 Scarnafis writes again referring to his dispatch of January 13 relating to the Duc de Coigny, and adding that throughout the last six weeks the remarks made about him have been repeated with more force than ever and that 'the ladies above all permit themselves to say the most unrestrained and the most imprudent things that can be imagined.'<sup>1</sup>

It was from this quarter that the monstrous libel was started which was taken up by the gutter press indicating the Duc de Coigny as the father of the princess to whom Marie Antoinette had given birth at the end of the year. Yet not only was the Duc de Coigny known to be the lover of another woman, the Princesse de Guéménée, but every detail concerning the circumstances which led to the birth of Madame Royale was known to the public and has been handed down to us.<sup>2</sup> The Spanish ambassador, the Comte d'Aranda, had made it his particular business to find out all about the 'matrimonial conditions [l'état matrimonial]' of the King and Queen, and he stuck at nothing in his search for information. It is therefore not only through Mercy's correspondence, not only through Marie Antoinette's intimate letters to her mother and those of Louis XVI to Joseph II, but through Aranda's unblushing revelations that the paternity of Madame Royale can be established with

<sup>1</sup> Flammermont, *Correspondances Diplomatiques*, pp 351, 352

<sup>2</sup> See the contemporary evidence of l'Abbé de Véri, II 161: 'Cette naissance, arrivée le 19 décembre, a détruit absolument les bruits injurieux à l'honneur de la Reine. Les critiques les plus méchants qui avaient observé les jours et les heures des visites secrètes du Roi ont reconnu que les temps physiques ont trop bien combiné pour conserver le moindre soupçon.'

perhaps more certainty than that of any princess in history. Moreover, she grew up a typical Bourbon, with a distinct resemblance to Madame Elizabeth. M. Flammermont, the editor of the above quoted dispatches, observes:

‘It is a question of the conjugal relations between Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette and of the calumnies circulated against this Queen by disaffected courtiers or even by certain members of the royal family, and reproduced with satisfaction in the dispatches of the Prussian, Piedmontais and Neapolitan agents. The evidence of the Comte d’Aranda annihilates them; yet . . . he detested everything that was Austrian, and he had particular reasons for not liking Marie Antoinette.’

When later on the same calumnies were repeated with regard to the birth of the first Dauphin in 1781, the Comte d’Aranda disdained even to mention the malicious dispatches of the Prussian and Piedmontais ambassadors; ‘from this silence,’ observes M. Flammermont, ‘we can conclude that the Comte d’Aranda did not attach the least belief to these suspicions and was too loyal to stoop to reproduce them.’<sup>1</sup>

Apart from this evidence, does not reason itself reject such calumnies? Is it likely that Marie Antoinette, after suffering seven years of unhappiness because her husband had been unable to give her children, should have chosen the precise moment at which this disability was removed to take to herself a lover? If ever in her whole life she was tempted to leave the path of virtue, was it not during that period when her thwarted natural instincts drove her into imprudent follies, yet at the end of which Joseph II had declared her virtue to be intact?

The truth is that it was the fact of her having children which increased the malignity of her enemies. Until that moment they were not obliged to take her very seriously; as a mother, and above all as the mother of the Dauphin, she became at once a formidable obstacle to their plans.

But the baselessness of all the accusations brought against

<sup>1</sup> Flammermont, *Correspondances Diplomatiques*, pp 475, 478.



her was shown long afterwards by no other than the Comte de Provence himself. A hundred and twenty years later M. Ernest Daudet, searching amongst the papers of Louis XVIII, found an envelope on which one of the secretaries of the Court held by the Princes during the emigration at Mitau had written: 'Manuscript of the King to justify the memory of the Queen.' Inside was a long memoir entirely in the handwriting of the Comte de Provence, dated November 1798 and signed 'Louis,' for already by that date he was known to royalists as Louis XVIII although the Restoration did not take place until sixteen years later.

It seems that now the whole family which had stood between him and the throne had been swept away by the revolutionary flood, the Comte de Provence had been overcome by tardy repentance for the wrong he had done Marie Antoinette. In a covering letter he explained that, although he had not always been on good terms with her, she had been his friend at the end of her life and he suffered at hearing the calumnies still circulated against her. Under the veil of anonymity, which he felt it necessary to assume, he now desired his memoir refuting them to be published. For some unknown reason this wish was not carried out, and the memoir saw the light for the first time when published by M. Ernest Daudet in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* for July 15, 1905, under its original heading, *Réflexions historiques sur Marie Antoinette, reine de France et de Navarre*.

After describing the difficulties Marie Antoinette had encountered on her arrival at the Court—to which he himself had contributed!—the Comte de Provence praised her goodness of heart, recalled instances of her compassion for the poor and suffering which he had witnessed, and refuted the 'absurd' accusations brought against her of disloyalty to France. Then he went on to speak of her moral character:

'I will not undertake to deny that her too free manners laid her open to censure, but really one shudders when one thinks of the ease with which people of our time permit themselves to blast a woman's reputation. Marie Antoinette

was no doubt imprudent, but that is far from being guilty, and I do not think anyone in the world can prove she was that. But it was necessary to those who then, and for a long while previously, were working for the Revolution to deprive the throne of the respect which was its greatest safeguard. . . .'

The Comte de Provence went on to explain that since the physical development of Louis XVI had been retarded, it was supposed that Nature in his case had remained 'dumb' until 'facts came to prove the contrary.' Thus 'the birth of an heir to the crown, which should have endeared his mother to the nation and would a few years earlier have produced this effect to an incalculable extent, only gave weapons to her enemies. They would not, or at least a great number of people would not, believe that the birth of Louis XVI's children destroyed the opinion they had formed of her; they only persisted in seeing in it a proof of his wife's misconduct. So everything turned against this unhappy princess.

'As for me, I repeat what I have said already at the beginning of this work; I was in a position to compare what was said of her with facts. I could have wished for a more reserved bearing on her part which would have sheltered her from calumny, but I saw her treat people with whom she was never supposed to have liaisons with as much distinction as those with whom she was accused of guilty ones, which leaves me the right to think there was no more harm in one than the other.'

Thus on the evidence of his own brother the legitimacy of the children of Louis XVI is clearly established, and the reputation of Marie Antoinette is vindicated by a man who had been one of her principal detractors.

From 1778 onwards the Queen's whole outlook on life changed, and as the years went by she entered more and more into that third phase of her life—motherhood. This is not to say that she completely abandoned from this moment the frivolities which had kept her amused throughout those years of 1775 to 1778. The habit of constant excitement

had become too strong to be broken all at once; besides, she was still surrounded by the people who had drawn her into the whirl of gaiety and who still from time to time led her into imprudences which gave a handle to her enemies.

For one thing, she could not entirely give up her taste for masked balls at the Opera, and it was this that, only two months after the birth of 'Madame Royale,' led her into the famous 'aventure du fiacre.' Louis XVI, who for some years had not attended these balls, decided to go with her alone to one on Shrove Sunday. According to Mme Campan the King was bored, spoke to only one or two people who instantly recognized him, and thought nothing amusing except the pierrots and harlequins. According to Mercy, 'their Majesties stayed till six in the morning without being recognized, which seemed to amuse the King very much,' and he consented to the Queen's proposal that they should attend the next ball on Shrove Tuesday. At the last moment, however, the King changed his mind and agreed with the Queen that she should go with one of her ladies, taking every precaution that she should not be recognized. Marie Antoinette therefore started off in one of the royal carriages with the Princesse d'Hénon, and drove to the house of the Duc de Coigny in Paris in order to change into an ordinary carriage which would excite no remark. Unfortunately the one provided was so old and rickety that it broke down at a little distance from the Opera and the Queen and her companion were obliged to wait in a shop whilst her footman called a cab. This mode of conveyance so amused Marie Antoinette that on arrival at the ball she could not resist saying to one or two of her friends: 'C'est moi en fiacre; n'est-ce pas bien plaisant?' All this time the Queen had not unmasked and she remained masked all night, which she spent surrounded by members of her suite, who had found their way there separately and did not leave her side throughout the ball. She left in the early morning without having been recognized.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, iii 298, 299, Campan, p 137.

This innocent adventure had no other effect than to make the King laugh and to amuse the Court with the idea of the Queen driving in a cab. But immediately the story went round Paris that Marie Antoinette had been engaged on some mysterious nocturnal escapade and had given a rendezvous to the Duc de Coigny who, as Mme Campan observes, 'was well thought of at the Court, but as much by the King as by the Queen.'

So much for the 'aventure du fiacre.' The next incident to give rise to scandal occurred in April. At the beginning of that month Marie Antoinette had an attack of measles and retired to Trianon for her convalescence. The King, who had not had this complaint, was kept away from her on account of the infection, but the Comte and Comtesse d'Artois remained with her the whole time, whilst the Comtesse de Provence, the Princesse de Lamballe and young Madame Elizabeth were constantly at her bedside. But at the same time four seigneurs of her society—the Ducs de Coigny and de Guines, the Comte Esterhazy and the Baron de Besenval—constituted themselves sick nurses and stayed in her room from morning till night.

This was not as odd as it would appear to-day; the privacy we associate with a bedroom was non-existent at that date. The leaders of the great salons of Paris under Louis XIV habitually entertained their visitors whilst actually in their beds, which were placed in an alcove, and the space on each side, known as the *ruelle*, was provided with chairs on which the guests took their seats. In the eighteenth century women of society received both men and women not only whilst in their beds, but at their toilets, and even in their baths. These were not open baths like those of the present day, but slipper baths with covers, and the bather wore a discreet flannel garment up to the neck. D'Allonville describes a long conversation that took place between the Duc de Choiseul and the Princesse de Guéménée whilst the lady reclined comfortably in hot water.

It was therefore not the presence of these four male nurses

in Marie Antoinette's bedroom that gave rise to comment, but the fact of preferring their society to that of her ladies-in-waiting, who naturally considered they had the right to be with the Queen, and it was asked derisively which ladies the King would choose to nurse him should he fall ill. Louis XVI himself had seen no harm in it, indeed Mercy asserts that he had given the arrangement his approval, thinking it well the Queen should be surrounded by people who would keep her amused.

Nevertheless it was a grave imprudence. But neither Louis XVI nor Marie Antoinette realized the necessity for guarding her good name against every breath of scandal. They were too near to things to perceive, as we can to-day, the attempts that were being made to undermine the throne, and consequently the importance of maintaining its prestige. They had no idea that they were living through the most critical moment of the French monarchy, and that every step they took was fraught with peril.

At this point we come to the second episode relating to Fersen. The young Swede had returned to Paris in the summer of 1778 after an absence of four years, and in a letter to his father dated August 26, thus describes his reception at the Court of France:

'Last Tuesday I went to Versailles to be presented to the royal family. The Queen, who is charming, said on seeing me: "Ah, this is an old acquaintance!" The rest of the family did not say a word to me.' <sup>1</sup>

Of what happened after this we know little, except from a letter written by the Comte de Creutz, the Swedish ambassador in Paris, to Gustavus III, King of Sweden, on April 10, 1779, which runs as follows:

'I must confide to your Majesty that the young Comte de Fersen was so well received by the Queen that it gave umbrage to several people. I admit that I cannot help thinking she has an inclination for him: I have seen too certain signs of this to doubt it. The young Comte de

<sup>1</sup> Klinckowstrom, *Le Comte de Fersen*, 1 p. xxxii.

Fersen's behaviour on this occasion was admirable in its modesty and reserve and above all in the line he has taken of going to America [to fight in the War of Independence]. By going away he avoided all dangers, but he certainly needed a firmness beyond his years in order to overcome this seduction. The Queen could not take her eyes off him during the last few days; when looking at him they were filled with tears. I beg your Majesty to keep this secret to himself and to Senator Fersen [Axel's father]. When the departure of the Comte was known all the favourites were enchanted. The Duchesse de FitzJames said to him: "What, Monsieur, so you are abandoning your conquest?" "If I had made one I should not abandon it," he said, "I am going away free and unfortunately without being regretted [sans laisser des regrets]." Your Majesty will admit that this reply showed a wisdom and prudence beyond his years. Moreover, the Queen behaves with much more restraint and wisdom than formerly. The King not only gives in to her wishes but also shares her tastes and pleasures.'<sup>1</sup>

This letter, reproduced triumphantly by every supporter of the theory that Fersen became the lover of Marie Antoinette, is the only document they can quote in which a responsible contemporary expressed the opinion that she had felt even a momentary *tendresse* for him.

But let us hear another version of the story. In 1907 the *Mémoires* of the Comtesse de Boigne were published, in which this passage occurs:

'The Queen had only one great sentiment and perhaps one weakness. M. le Comte de Fersen, beautiful as an angel and very distinguished in every respect, came to the Court of France. The Queen was *coquette* with him as with all foreigners, for they were the fashion; he fell sincerely and passionately in love, she was certainly touched and forced him to go away. He left for America, stayed there two years, during which he became so ill that he returned to Versailles aged by ten years and having almost lost the beauty of his face.

<sup>1</sup> Klinckowstrom, *Le Comte de Fersen*, i. p. xxxv.

This change is believed to have touched the Queen; but whatever was the reason the *intimes* hardly doubted that she had yielded to the passion of M. de Fersen. He justified this sacrifice by a boundless devotion, by an affection which was as sincere as it was respectful and discreet; he only breathed for her, and all his habits of life were calculated to compromise her as little as possible. So this liaison, though guessed at, created no scandal.' <sup>1</sup>

When this passage appeared, poor Lady Blennerhassett, who had hitherto defended the virtue of Marie Antoinette, cast up her hands in despair and recanted. Mme de Boigne's damning revelations had convinced her that she had been mistaken.<sup>2</sup> But who was the Comtesse de Boigne? A child of twelve when Marie Antoinette died, and not born at the time of the incident she relates. How then did she know about it? Obviously through her mother, who was lady-in-waiting to Mme Adélaïde, the Queen's bitter enemy and one of the principal authors of accusations against the morals of Marie Antoinette!

A third version of the story appeared in the *Mémoires* of the Comte de Saint-Priest, Minister of the King's Household from 1788 to 1790. The question of Saint-Priest and his *Mémoires* will be dealt with fully in a later chapter, suffice it here to say that he displayed in them the utmost rancour against both Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. This is how he describes the foregoing episode:

'The Comte de Fersen . . . was specially noticed in 1779 when, having come to serve in France, he appeared at Versailles in the new Swedish costume. The Queen saw him and was struck by his beauty. He was indeed a remarkable figure. Tall, slender, perfectly formed, with fine eyes, a colourless but animated complexion, he was made to attract the eye of a woman who sought rather than feared vivid impressions. Her first equerry who gave her his hand said that he felt in the movement of the princess's hand a

<sup>1</sup> Comtesse de Boigne, *Mémoires* (1907), p. 32.

<sup>2</sup> *Revue Bleue* for October 1, 1907, p. 346.

keen emotion at this first sight. The Comte de Fersen was not long in perceiving his advantage and he knew how to profit by it. Mme de Polignac did not interfere with her friend's taste. . . . The Queen was thus encouraged to follow her inclination and gave herself up to it without much prudence.' <sup>1</sup>

We have thus three different versions of the famous episode, which all contradict each other. For according to de Creutz the Queen felt a *tendresse* for Fersen, who discreetly retired from the scene, but both behaved in an exemplary manner: according to the Comtesse de Boigne it was Fersen who fell madly in love with the Queen, and it was not until after his return from America that, touched by the ravages this unrequited devotion had wrought in his physiognomy, she was believed to have 'yielded to his passion.' According to the Comte de Saint-Priest, however, the Queen fell in love with Fersen on his first appearance at Versailles in his Swedish uniform, and immediately entered into a liaison 'without much prudence.' Saint-Priest has nothing to say of Fersen going away for three years—not for two, as the Comtesse de Boigne wrongly stated—nor of his extreme discretion and the restraint shown by the Queen of which the Comte de Creutz speaks.

Let us now see what Fersen says himself in his private Journal and letters about his visits to Versailles during the period in question. From these it appears that his favour at the Court of France was primarily due to the prestige enjoyed by his father, the famous Field-Marshal, leader of the pro-French *parti des Chapeaux* in the Swedish diet. 'Everyone receives me so well here,' he writes to his father on October 1, 1778, 'and they speak so much of you, my dear Father . . . even the Queen shows me politeness and has spoken to me of you.' In November he writes that the Queen has heard of his Swedish uniform and asked him to wear it at the Court,<sup>2</sup> so it was not, as the Comte de Saint-Priest makes

<sup>1</sup> Comte de Saint-Priest, *Mémoires* (1929), II 67

<sup>2</sup> Klinckowstrom, *Le Comte de Fersen*, I p xxxiii.



out, that he had appeared in this attire for his presentation and produced so startling an effect on the Queen at first sight. From his letters it is evident that Fersen was highly flattered by the notice taken of him. On September 8 he wrote to his father:

'The Queen, who is the prettiest and most amiable princess I know, has had the goodness often to enquire after me; she asked Creutz why I did not come to her "jeu" on Sundays, and having heard that I had come one day when none was held, she made me a sort of excuse.'<sup>1</sup>

That is all! The Queen told the young Swede politely that she was sorry he had come to her 'jeu' on the wrong day, and this is to be taken as an indication that she had fallen madly in love with him! A modern writer whose object is to prove this point cites it as evidence of the interest she took in him, and goes on to say: 'These six months'—of August 1778 to February 1779—'comprised the first important period in the amorous relations of Fersen and Marie Antoinette.'<sup>2</sup> But not a word of evidence is produced in support of this assertion.

Moreover, what were the six months in question? The four months preceding and the two months following the birth of Marie Antoinette's first child, a period during which we know from her letters she was completely absorbed by the thought of motherhood, and when, as Mercy relates, she was more than ever attached to the King. And we are asked to believe that at the supreme moment of her life, when the great desire of her heart had at last been fulfilled, she entered into a liaison with this young man from Sweden! Is such a possibility even physically conceivable under the circumstances? Moreover, is it likely that if such a situation had arisen Mercy, who was watching the Queen's daily movements like a cat a mouse, would have had nothing to say about it? But *not once in the whole vast correspondence of Mercy with Maria Theresa is the name of Fersen even mentioned.*

<sup>1</sup> Klinckowstrom, *Le Comte de Fersen*, 1 p xxxii.

<sup>2</sup> Alma Soderhjelm, *Fersen et Marie Antoinette* (1930), p 62

What are we to conclude from all this? Referring back to the letter of the Comte de Creutz as the only serious bit of evidence produced, it appears then that *in the opinion of the Comte de Creutz* Marie Antoinette was attracted by Fersen but that both he and she behaved with exemplary restraint. Yet are we necessarily obliged to accept the opinion of the Swedish ambassador, naturally proud to think that one of his compatriots had made so deep an impression on the Queen of France? Is it not more probable that Marie Antoinette simply thought this handsome boy attractive, and that her eyes—always prone to fill with tears on the least provocation—filled at the thought that he was going to the war, perhaps to lose his life on the field of battle? Perhaps too the Comtesse de Boigne may have been right up to the point of saying that Fersen had fallen in love with the Queen, and Marie Antoinette, guessing this, may have been touched by his youthful adoration. But any such hypotheses are miles away from the preposterous conclusion that Fersen had become the Queen's accepted lover.

Quite recently a further light was thrown on Fersen's stay in Paris during the following winter of 1779-80. This is contained in the letter of another Swede, the Baron de Taube, the friend and chamberlain of Gustavus III, addressed to his royal master on April 20, 1780. M. Roger Sorg, who discovered it in the archives at Upsala, and published it for the first time in 1933,<sup>1</sup> seems to find in it confirmation of his theory, advanced without any contributing evidence, that Fersen had formed a liaison with the Queen in July 1779. Taube begins by saying:

'The Queen has on every occasion distinguished the Swedes who have appeared at the Court. She did me the honour of speaking to me every time I had the honour of paying her my court and always she spoke of your Majesty. She told M. le Comte D'Usson that she did not see me often enough at Versailles and that he was to tell me so.'

Marie Antoinette did not see Taube often enough! What

<sup>1</sup> *Mercur de France* for July 15, 1933.

capital would have been made of this if she had said it of Fersen! But to proceed.

Taube goes on to tell the King of Sweden that at the Opera balls during the preceding winter the Queen had particularly distinguished young Count Axel de Fersen. 'She always walked about with him. She even entered a box with him and remained there talking to him for a long while.' There were envious people, adds Taube, who commented on this favour shown to a foreigner, and their comments reached the ears of the Queen, which only seemed to increase her fancy for seeing the young Count and for admitting more Swedes into her society. The Comte de Stedingk was invited to one of the King's supper parties, then the Comte de Fersen. Besides this Mme de Polignac and the Comtesse d'Ossun gave little fêtes at which games were played in their apartments. The Queen, and often the King, came to them and so did Fersen, who 'distinguished himself at these games, which pleased the King and Queen very much.' The particular game at which Fersen displayed his prowess appears to have been blind-man's-buff!

Taube ends his letter by saying that Fersen may be contemplating matrimony as he is very much taken with the charms of Mme de Matignon. It is certainly difficult to detect here evidence of a *grande passion* between the Queen and Fersen.

Marie Antoinette herself was well aware of the efforts made to discredit her in the eyes of the public and, perhaps unwisely, treated the stories which reached her with the contempt it might have been safe to display at any former period in French history. 'The Queen,' says Mme Campan, 'tranquillized by the innocence of her conduct and by the justice which she knew everyone surrounding her accorded to her private life, spoke with disdain of these false rumours. . . .'<sup>1</sup> On November 6, 1778, that is to say in the middle of Fersen's first six months in Paris, a chronicler

<sup>1</sup> Campan, p. 138

relates that a few days previously, during a conversation between the Queen, the Princesse de Chimay and Mme de Polignac, one of these scandalous stories was referred to, whereat Marie Antoinette said sadly: 'I am certainly very unlucky to be so hardly treated,' then with a return of her usual gaiety she added: 'But if it is malicious of other people to suppose I have lovers, it is certainly very odd of me to have so many attributed to me and to do without them all.' <sup>1</sup>

From 1779 onwards the Queen became more circumspect in her behaviour, and Mercy reports real reform on essential points. She dresses more simply, seldom goes to Paris, only once in a month at the end of the year to see an exhibition of pictures at the Louvre and again in the following month to hear an opera of Gluck's; on this point, says Mercy, she has changed entirely.<sup>2</sup> 'My dear mother can feel reassured with regard to my conduct,' she writes to the Empress on August 16, 1779, 'I feel too much the necessity of having children to neglect anything on that score. If in the past I was in the wrong, it was childishness and irresponsibility, but now my head is well screwed on and she can be sure I realize my duty in this respect. Besides I owe it to the King for his tenderness and I may say, his confidence in me, on which I can congratulate myself more and more.' <sup>3</sup>

And Mercy writes to Maria Theresa: 'For a long while the royal family has not spent its time so quietly. . . . The daily occupations of the Queen are concerned with the same accustomed objects, of which the principal one is the care her Majesty gives to her august child. A little reading, more amusing than instructive, and a little needlework partly fill up the time the Queen spends in her *cabinets*.' <sup>4</sup> It is true that gambling was not given up altogether, but she played seldom and with greater caution, showed less indulgence to her 'favourites,' more regard for economy, and found her greatest happiness in watching the progress

<sup>1</sup> Lescure, *Correspondance Secrète*, 1 235

<sup>2</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, III 350, 359.    <sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, III. 339    <sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, III. 341.

of her baby daughter. At all hours of the day she would find her way to the nursery, often with the King, who, says Mercy, shared with her the care of this precious child.<sup>1</sup> One day to their joy she says her first word: 'The poor little thing,' writes Marie Antoinette to her mother, 'is beginning to walk very well in her basket. The last few days she has said "Papa"; her teeth are not through yet but one can feel them. I am very glad she began by naming her father, which will attach him to her still more.'<sup>2</sup> Seven months later Marie Antoinette writes of her child's health and strength, 'she can walk alone,' then she adds: 'I dare to confide to my dear mother a happiness I had four days ago. As there were several people in my daughter's room, I made one of them ask her where her mother was. The poor little thing, without a word being said to her, smiled and came to me holding out her arms. It was the first time she seemed to recognize me, I confess that gave me great joy and I think I love her still better since then.'<sup>3</sup>

The Queen, indeed, became so wrapped up in the child that Mercy found it impossible to interest her in public affairs. In a letter to Joseph II on November 22, 1782, when the princess was nearly three years old, he reports that the Queen 'has undertaken her education and has her with her nearly all day,' and a month later complains that: 'One cannot calculate the effects of the Queen's instability of ideas. Her charming qualities are combined with a *légèreté* which eclipses them to a great extent. Since she has occupied herself with the education of her august daughter and kept her continually in her room, it has been hardly possible to talk of any serious or important subject without its being interrupted every moment by the little incidents of the royal child's play, and this inconvenience adds so much to the natural inclination of the Queen to distraction and inattention that she hardly listens to what one says to her and understands it still less.'<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, III 299

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, III 407

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, III 339.

<sup>4</sup> *Mercy et Joseph II*, I, 151.

And this was at a time when Marie Antoinette was already accused of interfering in affairs of State! The truth is that from 1779 onwards motherhood gradually became her one absorbing interest, an interest increased tenfold by the birth of the first Dauphin in 1781.

From the moment of Madame Royale's birth Maria Theresa had never ceased to importune her daughter for an heir to the French throne. 'We must have a Dauphin!' runs as a perpetual refrain throughout her correspondence. Unhappily she did not live to see the fulfilment of her great desire, for the Empress died on the 29th of November 1780. For all her severity she was deeply mourned by Marie Antoinette, although she little realized what the loss of this often wise counsellor would mean to her in the difficult and dangerous future. It was a loss also to posterity, for with the death of Maria Theresa we come to the end of those minute and intimate accounts of Marie Antoinette's daily life sent regularly to Vienna which have enabled us hitherto to follow her career step by step. Mercy continued to correspond with Joseph II and the Prince de Kaunitz, but these letters cannot compare in interest with those addressed to the Empress.

One can imagine the joy with which Marie Antoinette would have written to her mother after the great event of October 22, 1781. This time the public were excluded, only the King's brothers and their wives and the Queen's ladies were admitted to the room. To avoid the shock of disappointment if the child proved again to be a daughter, the Queen was not to be told its sex until all danger had passed. How passionately she longed that it should be a son! All through those empty seven years this had been her one thought, and the anguish of seeing the Comtesse d'Artois giving heirs to the throne of France had cost her the bitterest tears of all. If the mere prospect of motherhood had seemed like a dream too good to be true, it must have been a moment too marvellous for belief when the long silence that reigned around her bed was broken by the King coming forward and

saying with tears in his eyes: 'Madame, you have fulfilled my desires and those of France: you are the mother of a Dauphin!'

Then the child, who had been taken into the King's 'grand cabinet' to be washed and dressed, was brought to her by Mme de Guéménée, and the Queen kissed it rapturously. Never had any of the seventeen princes and princesses born in that same bedchamber received so ecstatic a welcome on entering the world! Such was the rejoicing that in the antechamber, where a crowd was waiting to hear the news, an amazing scene took place, everyone laughed and cried alternately, men and women indiscriminately fell on each other's necks, and when Mme de Guéménée, beaming with pride, bore the infant through the room a storm of applause and hand-clapping broke out.

The King meanwhile could hardly contain himself for happiness, smiling through his tears he held out his hand to everyone in turn and lost no opportunity of proudly repeating the words: 'My son, the Dauphin.'

Even Joseph II, far away in Vienna, caught the contagion and wrote in ecstatic terms to Mercy:

'It is really in a transport of joy that I send you this courier at once and add these two letters to the King and Queen which convey only the first promptings of my heart and the compliments I pay them on this event. I did not think I was capable of feeling the joy of a young man, but this event, so longed for and which I dared not expect, has really gone to my head. You will share my joy very sincerely, for I know the workings of your mind and your attachment to me and the Queen. That this sister who is the woman I love best in the world should be the happiest is very gratifying.'<sup>1</sup>

In Paris the people went nearly mad with delight, stopping each other in the streets to talk of the good news, even to perfect strangers, flinging their arms round each other's necks and embracing rapturously. Then corporations of

<sup>1</sup> *Mercy et Joseph II*, 1 71.

working-men arrived at Versailles in procession, elegantly dressed for the occasion, each trade bearing its own emblems, the chimney-sweeps with a decorated chimney on which a tiny sweep was perched piping a song, the sedan-chair bearers with a gilded chair in which a handsome wet-nurse holding a small Dauphin was seated; the locksmiths marched rapping on an anvil, the bootmakers bearing a diminutive pair of boots for the little prince, the tailors a little uniform of the regiment already assigned to him, the butchers driving a fat ox, the confectioners, the masons, all following gaily along the route to the château. Preceded by bands of music they filed across the Cour de Marbre, to the delight of the whole Court, for nine days in succession, and the King, never tired of watching the demonstrators, had twelve thousand livres distributed amongst them.

In a separate procession came the *poussardes* in black silk and diamonds, to congratulate the Queen during her convalescence, and three were admitted to her bedside, where one of them, a pretty woman with a fine voice, delivered a speech composed by La Harpe and written on a fan as an aid to memory. Three speeches in fact were delivered—to the King, the Queen and the Dauphin. To the King they said: ‘Sire, if Heaven owed a son to a King who regards his people as his family, our prayers and wishes have asked it for a long while. At last they are fulfilled. Now we can be sure that our children will be as happy as we are, for this child must resemble you. You will teach him, Sire, to be good and just like you. We undertake to teach our children how to love and respect their King.’

To the Queen they said amongst other things: ‘We have loved you so long, Madame, without daring to say so that we need all our respect in order not to take advantage of the permission to express it to you.’

Marie Antoinette had little occasion in the past to believe in the affection of these women whose coarse insults had made her shudder, but now, touched by their change of attitude, she received them with her usual charm and



grace, and a great feast was spread for them in the château.

Not content with speechifying, the *poissardes* also indulged in versifying and made up a couplet which the King and Queen sang together during Marie Antoinette's convalescence:

‘Ne craignez pas, cher papa,  
D’voir augmenter vot’ famille,  
Le bon Dieu z’y pourvoira :  
Fait’s-en tant que Versailles en fourmille;  
’Y eût-il cent Bourbons cheu nous,  
’Y a du pain, du laurier pour tous.’

For a whole month festivities and rejoicings took place all over the country—processions, free concerts and theatrical performances: *Te Deums* were sung in the churches. On January 21st—sinister date—the King and Queen went to Paris to give thanks at Notre-Dame and at Sainte-Geneviève for the birth of the Dauphin. At night the city was magnificently illuminated; the great squares were a blaze of light. Who could have dreamt on passing through the Place Louis XV, glittering at every point on this joyful evening, that it was to become that field of blood, the Place de la Révolution, where eleven years later to a day the monarch whom the people now hailed as their King and father was to meet his end amidst the rejoicings of a demented populace?

## CHAPTER XI

### NECKER

It is now time to go back to public affairs and follow the course of events from 1776 onwards. On the fall of Turgot and Malesherbes in May that year, Turgot was succeeded as Comptroller General of Finances by Clugny de Nuis, and Malesherbes as Minister of the Interior by Amelot, intendant of Burgundy, a complete nonentity.

The choice of Clugny was the more disastrous of the two. Louis XVI seems to have been jockeyed into it by Oigny, intendant of the royal posts—the man who had forged the letters from Turgot which contributed to his downfall, and who now succeeded, again with the aid of forged documents, in persuading the King that his friend, Clugny, intendant of Guyenne, had made himself immensely popular by his administration of this province. Clugny in reality was absolutely discredited by the immorality of his private life and detested for the hardness of his character; the policy he now followed was one of complete reaction. Louis XVI was not long in repenting his decision. ‘I believe we have made a mistake again!’ he said with a sigh only a fortnight after Clugny’s appointment, and unable to conceal his dislike treated his new Minister with the utmost coldness. But the firmness he had shown in collaboration with Turgot seems to have deserted him, and he allowed himself to be persuaded by Clugny’s arguments to re-establish the *corvées* by the edict of August 11, 1776, and the *jurandes* and *maitrisés* eight days later—on August 19. These measures delighted the Parlement, which had throughout opposed the work of Turgot. The establishment of a State lottery and other ventures of a more discreditable kind were rapidly

property and describe the rich as devouring the substance of the poor. Henceforth Necker came to be regarded in certain philosophical circles as a likely successor to Turgot.

Necker's appointment to the Treasury was brought about, however, by a curious intermediary. A certain young man named Jacques Masson, devoured with ambition, had set his heart on playing a political rôle, and having given himself the title of 'Marquis de Pezay,' after some lands belonging to his family, started to write a series of comments on public affairs which he persuaded one of the lackeys of the *petits appartements* to place on the King's table. These memoirs, at first anonymous, interested Louis XVI, who was not long in discovering their author, and de Pezay, encouraged to continue, proceeded to draw up a memoir inspired by his friend Necker proposing remedies for the deranged state of the finances. It was thus that in consultation with Maurepas the King decided to appoint Necker to the royal Treasury.

Louis XVI was now taking politics very seriously; seated at his bureau in the embrasure of the window of his library, with well-worn books strewing the floor and a sea of papers around him, he worked for hours a day with his Ministers.<sup>1</sup> On February 16, 1777, the author of the *Correspondance Secrète*, never prone to sycophancy, writes: 'We have for King, a young prince, good and equitable, who has no vices nor any dominating passion other than that of filling his post with honour, of making his people happy by the triumph of good faith and morals and of deserving the esteem of foreign monarchs. Wholly occupied with this noble ambition Louis XVI spends his time, shut up in his library reading what the Ministers place before his eyes, conferring with them and holding councils of state. He loves hunting as much as Louis XV, but, more attached to his daily duties, he often forgoes that pleasure. He protects arts and sciences more as a King than as a lover of them. Before he was King, Louis XVI used very much to enjoy working with his hands and making locks, he had a work-

<sup>1</sup> D'Hézacques, p. 156.

shop for the purpose and succeeded in astonishing people; at present he has not an hour left for this amusement. You might think perhaps from this portrait that this young prince is of a gloomy turn of mind, even farouche; but no, he has a true and noble gaiety, though this is only shown when he is amongst a few seigneurs who enjoy his esteem and confidence.' <sup>1</sup>

It was thus through his own study of public affairs that Louis XVI decided to appoint Necker, believing him to be the right man to undertake the finances. A fact that seemed to indicate disinterestedness on the part of Necker was his refusal to accept the emoluments attaching to his office. Necker, however, had a private income of 280,000 livres (circ. £12,250) a year and a fine house provided for him in Paris, which enabled him to live in the same style as other rich men of his day. Power, rather than money, was the goal of Necker's ambitions. The subordinate post he occupied under Taboureau was not calculated to content him for long, and he now set himself out to attain the highest office in the Ministry. With this object in view he made himself consistently disagreeable to Taboureau and hampered him so continually in his administration of the finances that it soon became evident one of the two must go. Taboureau, who had accepted the post of Comptroller General with reluctance, accordingly offered to resign on April 11, 1777. The King, not yet quite convinced that Necker was the genius he had been represented, declined to accept Taboureau's resignation, but by the end of June the situation had become impossible and Taboureau, determined to play no longer a subordinate part, insisted on abdicating in favour of his rival, who on July 2 became Comptroller General of Finances.

The choice was a surprising one from many points of view. For one thing Necker was a Protestant, and since the time of Henri IV no Protestant had been admitted to the councils of the Kings of France. This break with tradition showed

<sup>1</sup> Lescure, *Correspondance Secrète*, 1 21.

great courage on the part of so devout a Catholic as Louis XVI, but, like Turgot, Necker had succeeded in impressing him with his talent for finance as well as his zeal for the people's good. As the Marquis de Ségur observes: 'Amongst the measures proposed by his successive Ministers the King always chose and adopted preferably those that he imagined would please the humble and disinherited.'<sup>1</sup> In Necker he believed he had found the man to fit this requirement, and indeed Necker, like Turgot, was to become the idol of the people.

In appearance the new Comptroller General had nothing of the courtier. Tall, massive, with a long face of a pale yellow tint, with highly arched eyebrows above his bright intelligent eyes, with tight lips and a vast forehead surmounted by a high tuft of hair, he gave the impression of a typical Swiss bourgeois. 'He has the look and manner of the counting-house,' wrote Gouverneur Morris some years later, 'and being dressed in embroidered velvet he contrasts strongly with his habiliments.' Mme d'Oberkirch says his face was extraordinarily like Cagliostro's but without his sparkling glance, and that his manners were stiff and disagreeable.

Necker, like most of the new brooms selected by Louis XVI, began well but proved more efficient in sweeping away abuses than in constructive legislation. The first question to engage his attention was economy. Under the old régime the personnel of every department of the State and of the King's household had swollen to vast proportions, and Necker lost no time in reducing the number of officials. In the month of August, directly after his appointment to the post of Comptroller General, 421 of these functionaries were done away with. It was not, however, until two years later that he felt his position sufficiently secure to embark on the work, attempted by Malesherbes, of reducing the King's household.

Throughout the past two hundred years the number of

<sup>1</sup> Ségur, *Au Couchant*, II 54.

people employed by the royal family had gone on increasing and it was not thought possible for any royal personage to move without an enormous following. Even the aunts, when they went to Vichy, took with them a retinue of 250 people.<sup>1</sup> On the birth of Madame Royale the household formed for her consisted of no less than eighty. Fifty doctors, surgeons and apothecaries were retained in the King's service. This state of things existed not by the wish of Louis XVI but by established custom that no one until Malesherbes had seriously attempted to upset. Necker attacked the problem boldly. In July 1779 the number of treasurers were reduced; by the edicts of January 19 and September 1, 1780, a Saint Barthélemy of retainers took place, ranging from high Court officials, intendants, and controllers of households, down to scullions and turnspits; no less than 406 posts were abolished at a blow. On September 30 came the turn of the King's chase, and the army of keepers, grooms, kennelmen, etc., was cut down by 1300.

These economies were made with the full approval of the King, who now showed himself again capable of great resolution. The Duc de Coigny having ventured at the *lever* to protest against the reductions being made in the royal stables, Louis XVI cried angrily: 'I wish to introduce order and economy into all parts of my household, and those who object I shall break like this glass,' and taking a crystal goblet from the table he flung it to the ground, breaking it to smithereens. The Queen who, as we have seen, had been accused of unduly favouring the Duc de Coigny, took part with the King, and though the Duc had undoubtedly been one of her greatest friends she could not forgive his conduct on this occasion. Shocked at the bad grace with which he had submitted to this reform, she went completely over to the side of the Comptroller General.<sup>2</sup>

Marie Antoinette from the outset had formed a high opinion of Necker and willingly agreed to all the reductions

<sup>1</sup> Ségur, *Au Couchant*, II. 176.

<sup>2</sup> Lescure, *Correspondance Secrète*, I. 337.

he proposed in her household. More tactful than Turgot, whose brusque manner had often offended her, Necker showed respect and consideration for the young Queen's wishes and wisely appealed to her reason, which, as even the Comte de Saint-Priest admitted, could usually be depended on when the interests of the State were clearly put before her.<sup>1</sup> It is thus that she writes to her mother on February 15, 1780:

'The King has just issued an edict which is only a preparation for the reform he wishes to make in his household and mine. If it is carried out it will be of great benefit not only for economy but also in the matter of public opinion and satisfaction. We must await results in order to count on this, it was attempted unsuccessfully under the last two reigns. The King has the power and the will to do it, but in this country there is so much difficulty over matters of form that if one does not choose the right one fresh obstacles will arise as in the past.'<sup>2</sup>

That was just the trouble! To make plans for economy was easy enough; the question was how to set about it without creating vast discontent. For, extravagant as the old régime had been, it had provided hundreds of people with a livelihood, and these people, hitherto maintained at the King's expense, had now to seek employment elsewhere or to be compensated for the loss of their posts. Just as in the case of Saint-Germain's reform of the King's military household, the dismissal of State officials entailed large sums for compensation which Necker was obliged to borrow, so that, in the opinion of Bertrand de Moleville, little real economy resulted. Then Necker's reform of the royal households met with furious antagonism from the princes of the blood and the higher Court officials. Necker himself wrote of these difficulties eleven years later:

'I found some courage when with the King. Young and virtuous, he could and would listen to everything. The Queen also listened to me favourably. But around their

<sup>1</sup> *Mémoires*, II 75.

<sup>2</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, III. 398.

Majesties, at the Court in the city [of Paris] to what antagonisms and hatred did I not expose myself! I had all the factions of private interests to combat, and in this continual struggle I risked my frail existence at every moment.' <sup>1</sup>

It may seem strange that at the moment Necker was making these economies in the royal households the Queen's privy purse was again doubled. The fact, recorded by historians without comment, needs explanation. In November 1779, after the war with America had begun, Mercy relates that the King, this time in consultation with Necker, proposed that her *cassette* should be raised from 200,000 livres (£8,750) to 400,000 (£17,500), but the Queen refused so large an increase at the moment, saying that whilst the war lasted she would not accept more than 300,000 (£13,125). Mercy, explaining this to Maria Theresa, observes that 'the Director General of Finances [Necker], who is much occupied in proving his zeal for the Queen, avidly seized on the opportunity of such an arrangement,' and adds: 'I must point out that this *cassette* is intended purely for acts of arbitrary generosity, and that in general everything that has to do with the service and the dress of the Queen, down to the pins for her toilet, are paid for out of other funds.' <sup>2</sup>

It will be seen then that on both occasions when the Queen's privy purse was doubled, it was done, not only with the consent but at the instigation of those two idols of the people, first Turgot, then Necker, and with the object of increasing her power to give away money in charity, which, as we shall see later, she did to a most generous extent.

What then of the sums given, not in charity, to the Queen's friends, notably the Polignacs? Mercy, writing to Maria Theresa on December 17, 1779, says that the Polignac family 'without any merit and by pure favour' have received in emoluments and other benefits nearly 500,000 livres (£21,875) a year during the past four years. <sup>3</sup> In the

<sup>1</sup> Ségur, *Au Couchant*, II 183

<sup>2</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, III 372.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, III 382.



following month, on January 17, 1780, he reports again that Mme de Polignac now wishes for the domain of Bitch to be assigned to them, asks for their debts to be paid and a dowry given to their twelve-year-old daughter who is about to marry the Duc de Guiche. Necker firmly protested against these demands and the Queen herself was 'revolted' by them. In conversation with the Comptroller General she 'agreed that it would be absurd to ask for a domain for her friend, that it would be enough to give her 200,000 livres (£8,750) to pay off her debts and settle an annual income of 25,000 livres (£1,093, 15s. od.) on her daughter.' But the Polignacs had succeeded in getting round Maurepas, with whom they had been intriguing for some time. For Maurepas had quickly recognized the advisability of keeping in with the people surrounding the Queen, and as early as April 1776 he had prompted Mme de Polignac to hint to the Queen that it was now time he should be officially proclaimed first Minister. It was therefore Maurepas who, going behind the Queen's back, persuaded the King to consent to an arrangement by which Mme de Polignac should give up her demand for the domain of Bitch but should receive 400,000 livres (£17,500) to pay her debts, the promise of an estate in the country that would bring her in revenues of 35,000 livres (circ. £1,531) a year and a dowry of 800,000 livres (£35,000) for her daughter. Marie Antoinette thus found herself in a very difficult position, and rather than take part openly against the friend to whom she had long been devoted she allowed matters to take their course. So, says Mercy, her hand was forced by Maurepas and she was 'deeply grieved' at the turn affairs had taken: 'She admitted to me that she very much regretted more resistance had not been made to the arrangement in question. The Queen added this remarkable sentence that "the Comtesse de Polignac was quite changed and that she did not recognize her [as the same person]."' <sup>1</sup>

It will be seen then that the largest of the liberalities to the

<sup>1</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, iii 391, 392.

Polignacs for which Marie Antoinette has been so much reproached were not made by her desire. When a few months later, in May 1780, the question of Mme de Polignac's domain arose, Mercy wrote: 'The Finance Minister [Necker] opposes this firmly; the Queen, convinced by reason, shows him no resentment, but it is to be feared that the Comte de Maurepas will persuade the King to make this gift and the public will think it was the Queen who wished it.'<sup>1</sup>

The fact is that the Polignacs had now made themselves so powerful and were able to exercise so much influence behind the scenes, not only through the Queen's affection for the Comtesse, but through the supporters they had gathered around them in every quarter, that they had become a formidable faction which even Ministers found it advisable to conciliate. It was thus that Necker himself, after resisting their demands for pecuniary benefits in May 1780, actually solicited honours for them in the following autumn<sup>2</sup> and in October the Comte de Polignac was created a hereditary duke, whilst his wife was given what was known as the *droit au tabouret*, which included the right to certain draperies on one's coach, to entering the courts of the royal châteaux drawn by four horses and the privilege of being kissed by the King on presentation—a custom which was said to bore Louis XVI extremely.

The King had undoubtedly shown himself weak in yielding to all the solicitations made on behalf of the Polignacs, whether by Marie Antoinette or his Ministers, yet this kind of favour was not as extraordinary as it seems to us to-day. The Polignacs were paid for services rendered—the Comte, now Duc de Polignac, first as equerry, then on January 1, 1786, as Director of the Posts, the Duchesse for entertaining on behalf of the Queen, the Comtesse Diane as lady-in-waiting to Madame Elizabeth.<sup>3</sup> In September 1782, when

<sup>1</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, III 432

<sup>2</sup> Segur, *Au Couchant*, II 288, 289

<sup>3</sup> The sums with which the services of the Polignacs were rewarded could not, of course, compare with those lavished on the favourites of Louis XIV and Louis XV. The expenditure of Mme de Pompadour, during the nineteen

the sensational bankruptcy of the Prince de Guéménée necessitated his wife relinquishing her post as Gouvernante of the Enfants de France, the Queen appointed the Duchesse de Polignac in her place. Far from aspiring to this honour the Duchesse accepted it with great reluctance. Delicate in health, indolent and easy-going, she had little desire to undertake a post which was no sinecure and entailed the arduous duty of watching over the Dauphin's health, which was already failing, sleeping in his room and being awakened at all hours of the night. But, under pressure from her friends and at the desire of the Queen, she ended by yielding and carried out her duties with great devotion.<sup>1</sup>

That all these offices were bestowed on the Polignacs through pure favouritism is undeniable but not unprecedented. In our day such matters are managed more discreetly, and people with 'friends at Court,' that is to say with influence amongst the politicians, can obtain honours, titles, lucrative posts and 'sumptuary allowances,' without creating scandal or even comment. Nepotism has flourished under all forms of government, whether autocratic or democratic; the revolutionaries gave appointments to their friends, and Napoleon presented kingdoms to his relations. Under the old régime in France when the King was the sole distributor of posts and honours, the onus attaching to all such favouritism fell on him alone, and if he allowed himself to be led into these liberalities he was merely following long-established custom. The royal Treasury had in fact come to be regarded as a bottomless purse into which everyone might dip, and it was not only the King's mistresses, who in the old days had drawn largely on this fund, but people of all sorts and conditions who, finding themselves in financial straits, appealed to the King

years of her favour, is said to have amounted to no less than 36,327,268 livres (about £1,589,318), a yearly average of 1,911,961 livres (£83,648). Gramier de Cassagnac, *Histoire des Causes de la Révolution Française* (1856), I. 91, quoting *Registre manuscrit des dépenses de Madame de Pompadour* in the Archives of the préfecture de police at Versailles

<sup>1</sup> Rochetier, I. 449, Montjoie, *Histoire de Marie Antoinette*, I. 148.

to help them out. Pensions and rewards were doled out freely from the same source, girls of all classes were given dowries; after the birth of Madame Royale a hundred young couples were set up by the royal bounty.<sup>1</sup> The King had, in fact, come to be regarded as the father of a vast family, good for 'tips' all round, on birthdays, wedding-days and rainy days as well.

Throughout the eighteenth century these outgoings from the royal Treasury contributed heavily to the deficit. It is to the credit of Necker that he resolutely set his face against the abuses of a system which he could not entirely abolish, but which he attempted to mitigate by a series of edicts enforcing an annual survey of pensions paid out and estimating the amount they would cost the Treasury. These measures were inadequate, but at least a step in the right direction.

Meanwhile, in order to meet the growing deficit, Necker had adopted the principle of 'loans, not taxes,' which, of course, increased his popularity but produced only an apparent solvency.

Like Turgot, Necker desired to do away with the inequality of taxation, but here again he found himself faced by insuperable obstacles, and all he was able to accomplish was to bring about some reform in the administration of the *taille* and *vingtième*.

In the matter of hospital reform Necker, ably seconded by his wife, seems to have done good work, but on this point it is difficult to discover the exact truth. For whilst by some writers Necker is represented as the pioneer of the movement, others show Louis XVI as having taken the lead in making the care of the sick his especial concern immediately after his accession.<sup>2</sup> At that date the hospitals of Lyons, Marseilles, Bordeaux and Brest were, according to the ideas of their day, admirably organized, but the Hôtel-Dieu, which

<sup>1</sup> Rocheterie, 1. 396

<sup>2</sup> Edmond Biré, *Journal d'un Bourgeois de Paris* (1911), 1. 218; De Falloux, p. 37.

received the sick of Paris, was unspeakably foul. The King, hearing of the frightful conditions prevailing there, decided, in defiance of all custom, to visit it himself and, assuming a disguise, he drove up in a cab to the door of the Hôtel-Dieu so as to avoid any preparations being made for his reception that would conceal the real state of affairs. Thus incognito he was able to go through the wards, where he found three and four patients crowded into one bed and the dying heaped in filthy holes. After going up to each bedside, examining and questioning all those who could tell him of their sufferings, he left with tears in his eyes at the sight of their misery.<sup>1</sup>

It seems probable, however, that this episode did not occur until 1778, for, according to M. de Ségur, it was Mme Necker who first drew the King's attention to the state of the Hôtel-Dieu. Louis XVI would have liked it to be pulled down and replaced by four large hospitals in healthy situations, but the funds were not forthcoming. However, with the aid of the Archbishop of Paris, Christophe de Beaumont, who contributed some 300,000 livres, the existing building was enlarged and improved, and the King ordained that at least 300 beds should be provided with a separate one for each patient.<sup>2</sup>

The King also doubled the endowment for the blind made by Saint Louis, increased the sums spent on the deaf and dumb, and founded welfare centres (*bureaux de secours*) along the banks of the Seine. As early as December 14, 1774, he himself had laid the foundation-stone of the School of Medicine.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile the Queen, on her accession, had founded a hospice for poor women at Versailles and a lying-in hospital, after the birth of her first child, in 1779.<sup>4</sup>

During the Ministry of Necker the work of prison reform was carried a step further by the institution of inspectors deputed to supervise the conditions of the jails and prevent brutality on the part of the warders, also to distinguish between the different classes of delinquents. By these means, wrote Louis XVI,

<sup>1</sup> Biré, *Journal d'un Bourgeois de Paris* (1911), quoting the contemporary Abbé Proyard, *Louis XVI et ses vertus*, 1. 89, 90

<sup>2</sup> Ségur, *Au Couchant*, II 203, 204

<sup>3</sup> De Falloux, p 38, and Foncin, *op cit*, p 491.

<sup>4</sup> D'Allonville, 1. 196.

he hoped 'to lend a helping hand to those who only owe their misfortune to having gone momentarily astray.'<sup>1</sup>

The form of torture known as the *question préparatoire*, applied to prisoners to extort confessions, was abolished, but the *question préalable*, by which culprits condemned to death were sometimes induced to reveal their accomplices, was not done away with till 1789. That this barbarous custom, finally abolished in England during the seventeenth century, should have been allowed to subsist so long is certainly surprising, yet the blame cannot rest wholly on Louis XVI, since none of his three most humanitarian Ministers—Turgot, Malesherbes and Necker, all idols of the people—seem to have displayed any greater energy in the matter.

To Louis XVI at any rate belongs the glory of having shown throughout his whole reign a continuity in the spirit of reform. In all the measures taken while he was still in power for the relief of suffering humanity succeeding Ministers were only seconding the intentions of the King; the merit due to each is difficult to apportion because the panegyrists of each Minister omit all mention of the part played by the King, whilst the panegyrists of the King leave the Ministers out of the question. The truth is clearly that whenever a Minister showed concern for the welfare of the people he found his principal support in Louis XVI.

Owing to the way history is written few people probably realize that Louis XVI actually visited the poor in their homes. Such a thing had not been known since the days of the good King Henri IV and in those days of rigid etiquette was the more extraordinary. It was the custom of Louis XVI to do good by stealth, and often, contemporaries tell us, he would slip out of the château by himself and find his way to humble dwellings, known to him alone. Entering the cottage of the peasant, says Montjoie, he would 'press him to his heart' with tears of sympathy whilst bringing him much needed relief in the form of largesse.<sup>2</sup> On one of these occasions he was observed leaving the château by a

<sup>1</sup> Ségur, *Au Couchant*, ii. 209

<sup>2</sup> Montjoie, *Éloge . . . de Louis XVI*, pp. 92, 93.

guard, who, thinking it his duty to follow him at a distance, saw the King enter a very shabby house in the town. At the news of the King's presence there a crowd of other guards and seigneurs collected at the doorway, and Louis XVI, emerging from his visit, found all his entourage awaiting him. 'Parbleu, Messieurs!' he said with his great hearty laugh, 'it is really very hard that I cannot go off on an adventure without your knowing it!' <sup>1</sup>

The thought of the poor was always present to his mind. One day on returning from a journey he found that repairs costing 30,000 francs had been made in his apartments, whereat he 'made the whole castle resound with cries and complaints against this extravagance, saying: "I might have made thirty families happy with this sum."' <sup>2</sup>

To Louis XVI must therefore belong the prime merit of the reforms introduced by his succeeding Ministers.

The edict of August 10, 1779, abolishing servitude in the King's domains cannot at any rate be described as the work of Necker, since, as we know, this had been the King's wish all along and the measure he had insisted on enforcing at the Séance Royale during the ministry of Turgot. When urged by Clugny to re-establish the *corvée* he had yielded only to arguments which must have had some foundation of reason, since Necker did not attempt to reverse Clugny's policy with regard to the country in general but merely worded the edict by which Louis XVI expressed the wish to make this sacrifice on his own account—a sacrifice which it was not Necker's to make. This edict was preceded by a preamble which said: 'Since we find our principal glory in ruling a free and generous nation, we have been unable to see without pain the remains of servitude subsisting in several of our provinces. We have been affected by seeing that a great number of our subjects servilely attached to the soil are regarded as part of it and have not the consolation of disposing of their goods

<sup>1</sup> Montjoie, *Éloge de Louis XVI*, pp 92, 93, Nougaret, *Règne de Louis XVI* (1791 edition), 1. 116, 117, Lescure, *Correspondance Secrète*, 1. 25. Date of February 28, 1777

<sup>2</sup> Soulavie, *Mémoires*, II. 43

after death. [A reference to the right of *mainmorte* by which certain vassals were attached to the lands on which they worked as serfs and could not bequeath the fruit of their labours to their children] . . . Justly touched by these considerations we should have wished to abolish these vestiges of a rigorous feudalism without distinction. But our finances do not permit us to redeem this right from the seigneurs, and restrained by our respect for the laws of property, we abolish the right of servitude not only in our domains but in all those rented by us and by the Kings our predecessors. . . . If the principles we have developed prevent us abolishing without distinction the right of servitude, we have held nevertheless that the exercise of this right is carried to an excess that we cannot defer checking and preventing; we refer to the right of succession over the serfs and *mainmortables*; an excessive right to which the tribunals have hesitated to accede and which the principles of social justice can no longer allow to subsist. Finally we shall see with satisfaction our example and that love of humanity, so peculiar to the French nation, leading under our reign to the abolition of the rights of *mainmorte* and of servitude, and may we also witness the entire liberation of our subjects who, in whatever state of life Providence ordained them to be born, claim our solicitude and have equal rights to our protection and our benevolence.’<sup>1</sup>

Unhappily this noble example was not followed; it needed the shocks of 1788 to bring the seigneurs of France to realize the injustice of those rights which, in the end, on August 4, 1789, they freely surrendered.

The work of Necker, like that of Turgot, was thus to second the King’s own natural inclinations and to give a form to his desire for the people’s good. Yet in the long-run Necker showed himself little firmer than his royal master, for both he and Louis XVI allowed themselves to be overruled in a matter of vast import to the destinies of France—the American War of Independence.

<sup>1</sup> Ségur, *Au Couchant*, II. 189, Biré, *op. cit.*, I. 210.



## CHAPTER XII

### THE AMERICAN WAR

THIS is not the place to review the rights and wrongs of the great conflict between England and America that had been brewing since the middle of the eighteenth century. The point here to consider is the policy of Louis XVI in entering the lists and the extent to which this contributed to the Revolution.

From 1775 onwards the cause of the American insurgents had met with increasing support from public opinion in France, and as early as April of that year war was believed to be imminent. The lead was given by the young nobles, fired by a desire for 'glory'; but the military spirit inflamed the whole nation, eager to retrieve the losses of the Seven Years' War, to restore the prestige of the French army and wreak revenge on the eternal rival—England. With strange inconsequence the *anglomanie* which led the young bloods of France to imitate the English in the matter of sport and dress coincided with a passionate desire to fight them. But the rivalry between the two countries held nothing of the rancour displayed in modern conflicts between nations; even when the War of Independence was at its height, Englishmen could go to and fro from Paris as in peace time. D'Allonville relates that General Elliott, when starting out for his command at Gibraltar, was asked which route he was taking and replied: 'By France.' 'What, in spite of the war?' 'But the English and French are civilized people.' A reply, says d'Allonville, 'that deeply shocked the good Germans.'<sup>1</sup>

This gentlemanly attitude towards the enemy was nothing

<sup>1</sup> *Mémoires*, I. 103.

new in France. Even Louis XV had shown the same respect for civilized methods of warfare. A certain man who had discovered the secret of Greek fire by which enemy ships at sea could be set in flames by submarine bombs, brought his invention to the King in the midst of war with England, and an experiment was made with it on the canal at Versailles which succeeded perfectly. But Louis XV summoned the man into his private room and forbade him with menaces ever to make use of his invention, saying that he would feel himself guilty of an atrocious crime by employing it against his enemies, and giving him 1000 écus to keep it quiet. The same thing had happened in 1702 when the secret had been brought to Louis XIV, who bought it in order to destroy it.<sup>1</sup>

England had certainly no desire to fight France, or America either, in 1775, and it was largely the belief prevailing in Government circles that everything might be settled peacefully with the disaffected colonists which retarded the military preparedness necessary to the successful prosecution of the war.

Louis XVI also was for peace. Although not favourably disposed towards the English, owing to his dislike of that aspect of their character represented by French *anglomanie*, he did not wish to draw the sword. In the spring of 1776, when war seemed imminent, he asked Turgot for his opinion, which the Comptroller General conveyed to him in a well-reasoned memoir. Whilst anticipating the final triumph of the Americans, Turgot opposed France's participation in the war, saying: 'We must reject all ideas of aggression, first as unjust, then as ruinous to our finances (a great war would in fact arrest all financial reform), finally as very dangerous, for it might bring about a reconciliation between England and her colonies.' Turgot went on to enumerate the precautions to take, showing great prudence and foresight. Louis XVI, to whom he read his memoir on April 6, agreed with him, observing: 'If I went to war I should

<sup>1</sup> D'Allonville, 1 151; *Mémoires de Madame de Genlis* (1825), ix. 68.

not be able to do my people all the good I wish.' <sup>1</sup> 'But,' says the *Correspondance Secrète* of January 9, 1777, 'the nation, which does not think as wisely as its head, dreams and talks only of war.' The Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, had been received with enthusiasm in France, where it was declared to herald the dawn of a new era. The arrival in the following December of the three American deputies, Benjamin Franklin, Silas Deane and Arthur Lee, in Paris, brought enthusiasm to the pitch of frenzy; these emissaries from the New World with their cloth suits, unpowdered hair and quiet manners seemed to the luxurious Parisians like grave Republican senators of the time of Cato suddenly transported into their midst.

Franklin, in his fur cap and spectacles, with his patriarchal air, soon became the rage of the salons, but he could count on firmer support than these provided, for first as member and then as Worshipful Master of the Loge des Neuf Sœurs <sup>2</sup>—which later comprised amongst its members such men as Brissot, Danton and Camille Desmoulins <sup>3</sup>—Franklin had the whole force of Grand Orient Masonry behind him. It should not be forgotten that Washington and Jefferson were Freemasons—Jefferson, who drew up the Declaration of Independence, was also an Illuminatus. The youth of France that went out to fight in the cause of American independence hailed largely from the Lodges of Paris <sup>4</sup>; La Fayette, as well as the leading Orléanistes, belonged to the aristocratic Loge de la Candeur, which on May 31, 1782, got up a subscription to provide a man-o'-war for the French fleet that was to be named 'The Freemason.' <sup>5</sup> In Prussia, Frederick the Great, head of the 'Scottish Rite,' referred to the American insurgents as 'those athletes of liberty' <sup>6</sup> and wrote of them to d'Alembert: 'I like these brave people

<sup>1</sup> Foncin, *op cit*, pp 469, 470

<sup>2</sup> Philip A Roth, *Masonry in the Formation of our Government, 1761-1799* (American, 1927), p 26

<sup>3</sup> Barruel, *Mémoires pour servir à l'Histoire de Jacobinisme*, iv. 274

<sup>4</sup> Gustave Bord, *La Conspiration Révolutionnaire de 1789* (1909), p. 43.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p 228.

<sup>6</sup> Rocheterie, i. 424.

and cannot help secretly wishing them well. It must be admitted that you are very pacifist!’<sup>1</sup> It was Frederick’s ex-A.D.C., Wilhelm von Steuber, who acted as military adviser to the Americans and helped to organize Washington’s army.

This is not the place to examine all the hidden intrigues at work behind the American War of Independence, although until they are properly understood the true history of that needless conflict will never be given to the world.

Whether as an emissary from the Loge de la Candeur or merely as a youth of nineteen thirsting for glory, the Marquis de la Fayette was the first to join the colonists in April 1777. The Comte de Ségur relates how one morning at seven o’clock, before he had risen from his bed, La Fayette burst in, and sitting down beside him, said: ‘I am starting for America!’ And he went on to explain that he had bought a vessel, loaded it with arms and munitions and collected round him a number of young officers eager to join the expedition. This plan was carried out in spite of the opposition of his family and of the Court, who had him arrested; La Fayette, having made his escape, found his way to Spain, where his ship awaited him, and set sail for America to be received with rapture by the colonists. One can imagine such conduct on the part of a man of iron, indomitable of will and resolute of purpose, but when one considers La Fayette’s subsequent career throughout the Revolution, his rôle of weathercock, of facing both ways, his total incapacity for seeing the right thing to do and doing it with determination, one cannot help wondering what was the incentive that at this one moment of his life enabled him to play a heroic part.

The action of La Fayette had an immense effect in firing the youth of France to follow his example. Necker, who three months later became Comptroller General, and also Maurepas, found it difficult to stand against the current which now—in July 1777—was flowing strongly in favour

<sup>1</sup> Lescure, *Correspondance Secrète*, 1. 113.

of war. But Louis XVI, wiser than his people, still stood for peace.

The Comte de Ségur, one of the young nobles who went to fight in the American cause, thus describes the King's attitude at this crisis:

'On all sides public opinion was pressing the royal Government to declare in favour of Republican liberty and reproached it for its slowness and timidity. The Ministers, gradually carried away by the torrent, were however still afraid to break with England and undertake a ruinous war; and, further, they were held back by the severe probity of Louis XVI, the most moral man of his time. Neutrality seemed a duty to this monarch, because in his eyes no English aggression justified a hostile action against the British crown. It was not the fear of expense or the chances of war that impressed him, it was his conscience that made him regard as perfidy the violation of treaties and of a state of peace without any other motive than that of bringing low a rival power.'<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile Vergennes, the Foreign Minister, whose sympathies were all with the colonists, whilst still professing neutrality, was secretly sending help to the Americans in the form of money, arms and ammunition.

This duplicity was more irritating to England than an open declaration of war. On the landing of the three American delegates in December 1776, Lord Stormont protested against the hospitality offered them by France and had even declared that he would leave the country the moment they set foot in Paris. The Ministry, however, replied that it was too late to stop them, and the incident blew over. But Vergennes' clandestine manoeuvres brought about a fresh crisis, and in July 1777 Stormont had an interview with Maurepas and Vergennes in which he 'complained bitterly of the conduct of France towards England since she had been at war with her colonies—a conduct so favourable to the insurgents and prejudicial to the mother

<sup>1</sup> Comte de Ségur, *Mémoires* (1890), i. 102.

country that but for the assistance of all kinds provided by France, these rebels would long since have returned to their allegiance.' This expostulation had the effect of shaking the two Ministers, who were afraid of bringing matters to a head 'because of the repugnance they knew the King felt for war.' The author of the *Correspondance Secrète*, from which these words are quoted, considered that England had been too long-suffering and that the Prime Minister, Lord North, had shown deplorable weakness: 'as soon as he was able to perceive, eighteen months ago, that the Americans would find resources in France he should have declared war on this kingdom. . . .'<sup>1</sup> Instead of this England contented herself with periodical remonstrances which did nothing to relieve the tension between the two countries.

The victory of the American troops at Saratoga in October 1777 further increased French confidence in the ultimate triumph of the colonists, and emboldened the Government to take the first step towards the official support of their cause by a secret 'treaty of commerce, alliance and friendship' signed on February 6, 1778. Louis XVI, who had been persuaded by his Ministers that this pact could be made with the Americans without an open rupture with England, now consented to receive the three representatives of the colonists for the first time, and on the 20th of March 1778 Benjamin Franklin, Arthur Lee and Silas Deane were presented to the King in private audience at Versailles. 'Assure Congress of my friendship,' said Louis XVI. 'I hope this will be for the good of both nations.'

But England had now been informed of the treaty, and on March 15 Lord Stormont was recalled by his Government. Yet still the British Ministry on one hand and Louis XVI on the other shrank from a recourse to arms. 'The King,' says the *Correspondance Secrète* on March 23, 'appears to be in a very bad temper at finding that he is being dragged into war against his wishes and in spite of all that he has done to avoid it.'<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Lescure, *Correspondance Secrète*, i. 2, 77, 78, 82.

<sup>2</sup> Vol. i. 150.

An incident that occurred in the following summer, however, overcame his last scruples. A French frigate, the *Belle Poule*, was cruising off the Lizard on June the 17th when she encountered a squadron of the British fleet from which one frigate, the *Arethusa*, detached herself and attacked the *Belle Poule*. A sanguinary combat followed, ending in the victory of the French ship, and the *Arethusa* retired discomfited.

This action on the part of the British was exactly calculated to exasperate Louis XVI. The French navy was the thing nearest to his heart; anywhere but on sea he could have suffered an affront to the French flag more calmly. But the affair of the *Belle Poule* decided him, and on July 10, 1778, he signed, though still reluctantly, the declaration of war on sea against England.

It has generally been believed that the Queen used her influence to bring about this decision. The Comte de Provence, however, in a passage to be quoted later, asserts that she was opposed to war, but once it had been declared, she identified herself whole-heartedly with the glory of France and rejoiced over every victory that attended French arms both on sea and land. When in February 1779 La Fayette returned to France, she received him warmly at Versailles and, according to his account, greeted him with the words: 'Give me news of our good Americans, of our dear Republicans!'

But we have only La Fayette's word for it that Marie Antoinette ever said anything so foolish, and his own Republican fervour may have coloured his report of the incident. Joseph II, at any rate, showed himself consistent when, on being pressed by a passionately pro-American lady at the Court of France to express his opinion on the revolt of the colonists against the authority of the British crown, he replied drily: 'Madame, I am a Royalist by profession. [Mon métier est d'être royaliste.]'<sup>1</sup>

During this brief visit to Paris, La Fayette was enrolled as one of the 300 adepts of Mesmer, whose experiments in

<sup>1</sup> Nougaret, *Anecdotes du règne de Louis XVI* (1778), II. 87.

magnetism were enthralling Paris, and the King, on bidding him farewell before his return to America, is said to have asked him ironically: 'What will Washington think when he hears that you have become the first apothecary of Mesmer?'<sup>1</sup>

Louis XVI, like Joseph II, realized the inconsequence of the support he had been persuaded to give to the American insurgents. When in 1779 Vergennes drew up a manifesto in the King's name justifying the policy of France with regard to England, Louis XVI appended annotations which showed not only a logical mind but an uneasy conscience.<sup>2</sup> Thus Vergennes makes the King say: 'His Majesty plainly declared to the King [of England] that he was not, and did not pretend to set himself up as, a judge of the quarrel between Great Britain and her colonies; nor did he pretend to avenge any supposed injustices on the part of England'; Louis XVI replied in the margin: 'We have done more, we have declared them [the colonists] to be a free people, we have conferred on them existence as a nation . . . It is this act of recognition into which we have entered that we are bound to prove to be just and legal.'

Vergennes said: 'The King might consign to silence and oblivion the calumnies and mistakes on which the King of England founds his defence; and it is with the greatest repugnance that he feels himself obliged to take some notice of them.'

Louis XVI replied: 'I ought not to impute to the King of England the possibility of having calumniated me: according to well-known principles of English law he cannot be guilty of a calumny. His Ministers are everywhere responsible, they alone are to be held guilty and it is to them we ought to attribute the calumnies of which we may have to complain. This remark is of essential importance.'

When Vergennes went on to cite the history of Mary Queen of Scots, Charles I and James II as precedents for the

<sup>1</sup> D'Allonville, I 101

<sup>2</sup> Soulavie, *Mémoires*, III 398 and foll., De Falloux, p 65.



colonists' revolt against lawful authority and as the means through which the crown of England had been secured by the present dynasty, Louis XVI replied that 'the assassination of King Charles and of Mary Queen of Scots are crimes which England has regarded as her disgrace for more than a hundred years; we ought not therefore to revive the memory of them by such severe and humiliating reproaches. . . . Besides, the House of Hanover is entirely exempt from all share in these criminal enterprises.'

Vergennes said: 'He [the King] remained a tranquil spectator of the contest between Great Britain and her colonies, and the utter aversion he felt for everything which could excite the slightest suspicion that he was taking any part in the business has prevented him from entering into correspondence of any sort with the American insurgents.'

Louis XVI replied drily. 'It would be difficult to persuade the French nation, the English or the people of Europe that France has taken no side in the troubles of the English colonies; it would therefore be better not to utter a syllable on this subject, since, true or false, our asseveration will hardly be believed.'

Vergennes then enlarged on the fruitless efforts made by Great Britain to reduce her colonists to submission, which had demonstrated to Europe the impossibility of bringing them again under her yoke. Louis XVI answered: 'What if England should reply to this that she would have been able to suppress the rebellion if France had not lent her aid to the insurgents?'

It is evident, therefore, that from the outset Louis XVI disapproved the clandestine assistance given by his Government to the colonists and reproached himself for having been drawn into war, yet the provocative action of the British in attacking French ships had forced his hand. If only England had declared war on France directly she realized that country was giving assistance to the insurgents and prosecuted the double conflict with the utmost vigour, or had refrained from goading France by pinpricks into an open

Franco-American alliance, all the disasters of 1778-1783 might have been averted. But British unpreparedness, combined with the obstructive attitude of the Whigs, lost the war into which wiser diplomacy would have prevented England from entering and that in the end proved fatal not only to her interests but to those of France.

Just as Turgot had foreseen, the five years' conflict into which France was plunged at this critical moment of her history held up all financial reforms. The plans for economy described in the last chapter—the reduction in the number of State officials and in the households of the King and Queen—were primarily instituted with a view to keeping the war going rather than as permanent measures for doing away with conditions that had become obsolete and should not have been allowed to subsist in times of peace. From the moment hostilities began Necker's policy was dominated by the war alone, and the necessity of raising funds for the purpose led him into financial operations which steadily increased the existing deficit<sup>1</sup> Still clinging to the slogan of 'loans, not taxes,' Necker borrowed large sums at an exorbitant rate of interest not only from French bankers and financiers but from foreign countries; the town of Geneva alone supplied about 100 million livres (£4,375,000).<sup>2</sup>

This plan of raising government loans, says Beaulieu, was copied from England but was not carried out with the same business-like methods. For when the British Government borrowed sums necessary for some particular purpose 'it never failed to establish a tax of which the quota equalled the interest of the funds borrowed,' whilst in France the Ministers, and notably Necker, 'did not establish fresh taxes to pay the interest of the loan; they borrowed because they could not tax any more.' In order, therefore, to defray this interest, they anticipated future revenues which in the end led to chaos. 'Such a delirium,' observes Beaulieu, 'must appear inconceivable, especially when one reflects that those

<sup>1</sup> M H Lemaire, *Histoire de la Révolution Française* (1816), I 6, 7.

<sup>2</sup> Segur, *Au Couchant*, II 160.

who thought out this system were long regarded as demi-gods on earth.' <sup>1</sup>

Necker indeed was regarded as more than a demi-god, and, in the words of Buffon, as 'a genius, a tutelary divinity and a lover of humanity who makes himself adored,' when on February 19, 1781, he came out with his famous *Compte Rendu*, or official statement of the financial situation. The idea of taking the public into its confidence by a publication corresponding to what we call to-day a Government 'White Paper' was wholly new to France and created an immense sensation. In so far as it explained the administration of finance and the uses to which the hated *tailles, dîmes, gabelles*, etc., were put, the *Compte Rendu* had an educative value, but when Necker went on to expose to the public the abuses of pensions and other forms of royal bounty in the past, he displayed the same indiscretion as in his *Essai sur le Commerce des Grains* during the *Guerre des Farines*. This question, which could only inflame the uneducated mind of the public, was essentially one to be settled in private with the King, who, as Necker himself admitted, had always shown himself sympathetic to schemes of economy. But Necker could never resist blowing his own trumpet, and his puff of himself, and also of Mme Necker, provoked smiles even from his friends. Moreover, in the most important part of the work—the actual state of finances—Necker's calculations were found to be incorrect, and instead of the credit balance he showed, there was actually a considerable deficit. But the public, which in every country prefers soothing assurances to unpleasant truths, adored Necker for declaring that the financial situation was flourishing and compared favourably with that of England.<sup>2</sup>

In April a further sensation was caused by the publication of another work of Necker's entitled *Mémoire au Roi sur les Assemblées provinciales*. This *Mémoire*, which had been drawn up and handed to the King in February 1778, proposed the institution of provincial assemblies to deal with the question

<sup>1</sup> *Essais*, I. pp. xlii, xliii.

<sup>2</sup> Ségur, *Au Couchant*, II. 355, 361.

of taxes—somewhat on the lines of Turgot's plan—by which Necker hoped to realize his schemes for doing away with the unjust inequality of taxation. As the scheme aimed at limiting the power of the Parlements by reducing them to their original functions as magistrates, it was necessary to envelop it in the greatest secrecy in order to avoid an explosion. The *Mémoire* was thus strictly confidential, intended for the King alone; only two copies were made, one retained by Necker, the other locked up by Louis XVI in his safe. The King, however, mentioned the matter to the Comte de Provence, who begged Necker to let him see the *Mémoire*. Necker, not daring to refuse the heir to the throne, read it aloud to him, and the Comte de Provence, hypocritically professing to have been immensely struck by it, asked to be allowed to read it for himself. Necker sent the document by a messenger, and the Comte de Provence, having tricked him into leaving it with him for a few days, had a copy made before returning the original to the Comptroller General. Then suddenly, three years later, in April 1781, he had it printed on his own printing-press and circulated amongst the members of the Parlement of Paris, whose fury, of course, knew no bounds. Further fuel was now added to the fire by the appearance of a second brochure entitled *Lettre d'un bon français* mercilessly criticizing Necker's *Mémoire*; the good Frenchman turned out to be no other than the Comte de Provence himself.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, by a ruse as despicable as that which had been employed to discredit Turgot, the way was prepared for the fall of Necker. Like Turgot, too, Necker now had the Parlements against him; at the same time he incurred the jealousy of Maurepas, whose policy was never to allow anyone to become more powerful than himself.

Louis XVI, however, still stood by Necker, although he had never liked him as he had liked Turgot. The stiffness of the Genevese chilled the kindly heart of the young King; his overweening vanity offended him. The Queen, on the

<sup>1</sup> Ségur, *Au Couchant*, II 370-384

other hand, preferred Necker to Turgot, not only on account of the tact he had shown in dealing with her expenditure but because she honestly believed him to be a man useful to the King and to the State.<sup>1</sup> She had shown indeed no resentment when Necker, on the score of expense, had prevented the Court spending a week at Trianon in August 1777 and at Fontainebleau in the following month, or again in September 1780, although the splendour in which Necker himself lived was hardly calculated to set an example of economy.<sup>2</sup> In spite of all this Marie Antoinette continued to believe in Necker and, although the Polignac set had now joined the ranks of his enemies, nothing they could say succeeded in turning her against him.

But Necker, finding himself surrounded by hostile forces at the Court and in the Ministry, began to weaken. Like Turgot and Malesherbes he lacked the staying power which would have enabled him to go forward in the face of opposition. It was the great misfortune of Louis XVI to be served by Ministers whose ardour for the public good was counteracted by the spirit of defeatism. They were all what Americans describe as 'quitters,' frantic to leave their posts as soon as their position became difficult or dangerous. In vain Louis XVI himself endeavoured to inspire Necker with fresh courage. 'Monsieur,' he said one day when they were working together, 'I know that you have many enemies who try to sicken and to thwart you, but go on with your operations, and rest assured that I will support you; you can count on my firmness.' Necker, however, continued to meditate retreat, and in May 1781 he told the King that in view of the perpetual annoyances to which he was subjected he wished to resign. But Louis XVI replied: 'Keep calm and continue to deserve my confidence by working for the happiness of my people. If one is to resign because one meets with obstacles in one's work, should I then lay down my crown?'<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ségur, *Au Couchant*, II 182, 278.

<sup>2</sup> Lescure, *Correspondance Secrète*, I 77, 89.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, I. 313, 396.

Necker then determined on a coup. By way of confounding the cabal leagued against him, he requested Maurepas to get him admitted to the King's Council of State, which, in the case of a Protestant, would have been unprecedented. The rusé Maurepas at once saw his opportunity to prejudice the King against Necker by representations on his inordinate presumption. Louis XVI saw through this manoeuvre and, well aware of Maurepas' jealousy, appealed to Vergennes for his opinion of Necker. But Vergennes, too, had nothing good to say of the Comptroller General, and warned the King against him as a dangerous subversive. Maurepas followed this up by telling Louis XVI that all the Ministers would resign if Necker were admitted to their midst in the Council. Necker, finding himself defeated, then had recourse to the Queen, who received him with the greatest friendliness and for an hour endeavoured, with tears in her eyes, to turn him from his intention to resign if his demand was not granted.<sup>1</sup> But Necker persisted in his determination, and a place in the Council being refused him, he handed in his resignation, which was accepted by the King.

So fell the second Comptroller General to whom the nation had looked for salvation in the great question of financial reform.

From this time matters went from bad to worse. The deplorable state of finances during the years that followed cannot, however, be attributed merely to the resignation of Necker. For whatever plans he had made for paying off his many loans, the fact remains that he left a heavy deficit and his successors bore the blame.

The first of these was an old man, Joly de Fleury, who pursued a reactionary policy, doing away with Necker's financial reforms by restoring a number of the State officials and members of the King's household whom Necker had suppressed. His age and infirmity enabled him to remain in office for only two years, and on April 1, 1783, he was replaced by d'Ormesson, a young man, honest but in-

<sup>1</sup> Ségur, *Au Couchant*, II 420

capable, who held his post for only seven months, and in November 1783 was succeeded by Charles Alexandre de Calonne.

The choice of Calonne has frequently been attributed to Marie Antoinette. In reality she had nothing at all to do with it and would have liked to see Necker recalled, but Mme de Polignac and the Baron de Breteuil, who had just superseded Amelot as Minister of the Interior, persuaded the King that Calonne was the right man for the post. According to Mme Campan and, a more reliable witness, Montjoie, the Queen was much displeased at the choice which she had not the power to prevent.<sup>1</sup> That it was not, perhaps, so bad a one as it has frequently been made to appear we shall see later.

Meanwhile old Maurepas had died—on November 21, 1781—or, as the Comte de Ségur expresses it, had gone quietly to sleep, passing out as comfortably as he had lived. Louis XVI mourned him sincerely, the 'Mentor' had become a habit it was difficult to break; besides, he was genuinely fond of him—the only one of his Ministers to whom he remained attached to the end. Often, when harassed with affairs of State, he would find his way up the same secret staircase by which Louis XV visited Mme du Barry, to sit with the old man in the boudoir of the favourite, explaining his perplexities, seeking his advice. 'Now I shall no longer hear Maurepas walking about over my head in the morning,' Louis XVI said sadly.

Maurepas, to do him justice, had been sincerely devoted to the King but had treated him as a child, making up his mind for him on every possible occasion. Bertrand de Moleville, who later became a Minister of Louis XVI, attributes his inferiority complex mainly to this cause. Maurepas, he says, 'set himself out solely to keep him away from public affairs or to disgust him with them, to stifle all his energy, in a word to make him absolutely null so as to reign in his name. . . . He took care to represent to the King as one

<sup>1</sup> Campan, p 194; Montjoie, *Histoire de Marie Antoinette*, 1. 179.

of his chief duties, that of deciding nothing for himself and of always adopting in council the opinion of the majority. . . . It is thus that Louis XVI, endowed with so much good sense and right-mindedness . . . played in his Council the passive rôle that M. Maurepas had set him. . . .’ Maurepas, Bertrand de Moleville goes on to say, never helped the King ‘to overcome that want of confidence in himself [cette défiance de soi-même], that excessive timidity which rendered him almost speechless when face to face with people he was not in the habit of seeing and made him momentarily forget things that he knew the best—he who had the finest memory I have ever known.’<sup>1</sup>

This view of Maurepas’ disastrous influence is confirmed by Mercy and also by the Baron de Besenval in almost the same words, and effectually refutes the fallacy of the King’s ‘imbecility’ and also that of attributing his inferiority complex to a merely sexual cause.

After the death of Maurepas Louis XVI, deprived of his mentor, came more and more to lean upon the Queen, and it is thus that after 1781 we find her gradually playing a greater part in public affairs.

The influence that Marie Antoinette is supposed to have exercised over the King in the choice of Ministers has been made one of the principal subjects of reproach against her. In reality, as we have seen, she had a natural distaste for politics, and such influence as she possessed had been used mainly in the matter of appointments in the army, navy and so on. But, under pressure from the Polignac set, she did, on at any rate one occasion, bring about the nomination of a Minister.

The Comte de Saint-Germain, whose introduction of blows with the flat of the sword exasperated the soldiers, had ended by making himself universally unpopular, and on September 23, 1777, had been superseded as Minister for War by the Prince de Montbarey, a connection of Maurepas’ and a most worthless creature. The scandals

<sup>1</sup> *Mémoires*, 1. 27-30.



resulting from the intrigues of his mistress were such that in the end even Maurepas realized that he must go, and actually suggested that he should be replaced by the Duc d'Aiguillon. Marie Antoinette, naturally indignant at the idea that this bitter enemy, who for years had been circulating infamous libels against her, should be given so important a post, lent herself to the plan formed by the leaders of the Polignac set to secure the appointment of the Maréchal de Ségur, who, though not an outstanding genius, was a distinguished soldier, brave, loyal and honest. The choice was approved by Necker. Although reluctant to use her influence with the King, Marie Antoinette, importuned by Mme de Polignac and in despair at the thought of alienating her friend, ended by persuading Louis XVI to appoint de Ségur, who thus became Minister for War in December 1780.

As far as one could tell, no better choice could have been made. The regulation made by him later on, precluding any but nobles from promotion to the rank of officers, which did so much to disaffect the army, was a development that no one could have foreseen at the time. Thus on the only occasion when Marie Antoinette secured the appointment of a Minister her rôle was to substitute a good man for a bad one. The contemporary Comte de la Marck, in an impartial review of her life, after refuting the calumnies circulated with regard to the millions she was accused of sending out of France to her brother, the Emperor of Austria, goes on to observe:

'I can equally and without any hesitation deny the influence the Queen was supposed to have exercised over the choice of the King's Ministers with the sole exception of the nomination of the Marquis de Ségur. . . . I will even add that the Queen, far from having any desire or taste for interfering in the affairs of the kingdom, had a real aversion to them arising perhaps from a little of the light-mindedness rather common to women. I declare then all that has been said on this subject to be absolutely false.'<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Mirabeau et la Marck*, i 35.

As to the alleged sympathy of Marie Antoinette for the American insurgents, it is certain that her influence played no part in deciding the question of France's participation in the war. The whole nation was seized with the same folly; the King alone, perhaps, foresaw something of the disasters to which it must lead. Even the successes of French arms were less than had been hoped at the beginning; the plan for the invasion of England, devised by La Fayette in 1779 and hailed with enthusiasm by the youth of France, proved impracticable, partly owing to the maladministration of the War Office under the Prince de Montbarey, but mainly to the adverse winds that throughout our history have miraculously protected our shores.

By 1779 indeed the French were growing tired of the war. Even La Fayette was reported to have written to a friend saying: 'I begin to perceive that, lured by a false enthusiasm for glory, I committed a folly in going over to the Americans.'<sup>1</sup> And Fersen, writing from America on November 30, 1782, observed that the relations between the colonists and their allies from the Old World had not been too happy.<sup>2</sup>

When at last peace was declared and the Treaty of Versailles, recognizing the independence of the United States, was signed on September 9, 1783, what had France gained? No fresh territory, but she had recovered her colonies in Senegal, the West Indies and India—not Canada, which had refused to rise against British rule. At the same time her prestige abroad had been increased, her voice counted for more in the concert of Europe, whilst the spirits of her army and navy had been raised immensely; the humiliation of the Seven Years' War was felt to be effaced.

But at what a price had these advantages been obtained! Not only had the war held up reforms but had enormously increased the deficit. The cost of the American War to France has been variously estimated; according to the Comte de Saint-Priest it amounted to no less than 3 milliards,

<sup>1</sup> Lescure, *Correspondance Secrète*, 1 255.

<sup>2</sup> Klinckowstrom, *Le Comte de Fersen*, 1 71.

*i.e.* 3,000,000,000 livres (£131,250,000), but this figure seems fantastic. The contemporary writer, the Duc de Levis, placed it at 1,200 million livres (£52,500,000), but the Marquis de Ségur, whose documentation can be more relied on, wrote in 1913 that after going into the figures he came to the conclusion that the total cost did not exceed 1 milliard livres, that is to say about £43,750,000.<sup>1</sup> This sum, however, represented a gigantic expenditure, particularly when one considers that the total deficit in the time of Turgot had only amounted to 135,000,000 livres (£5,906,250), and must therefore be regarded as the principal obstacle to the restoration of French finances and the main cause of the deficit which contributed so powerfully to the Revolution.

But it was not only the cost of the American War that proved disastrous to the French monarchy. The support given to the colonists had necessarily embittered relations with England and, when the crisis came six years later, lessened the indignation which would otherwise have been felt in this country for the attacks on the royal authority in France. In a word, Englishmen could not help feeling that to a certain extent the Court of France had brought it on itself by encouraging rebellion. Montjoie points out the disastrous example set by a monarchy in authorizing 'the insurrection of men who had overthrown the statue of George III, their King, broken it up and converted it into instruments of death; of men whose leaders preached that homage rendered to kings was a disgrace to humanity, and compared the courts of Europe to heathen temples, kings to idols who having eyes see not and having ears hear not the prayers addressed to them.' These, adds Montjoie, are the words of Samuel Adams at the American Congress in 1776.<sup>2</sup>

Such were the ideas with which many of the young nobles were impregnated on their return to France. As Soulavie points out, the greater number of those 'gentlemen democrats' who, in 1789, 'proposed the declaration of rights, abolished privileges, destroyed the foundations of the ancient

<sup>1</sup> Ségur, *Au Couchant*, II 239.

<sup>2</sup> *Éloge de Louis XVI*, p. 123.

monarchy, had made their revolutionary studies in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

They came back, says Beaulieu, 'enthused with the new principles, crying, "Long live Liberty!"; they declared that the King must no longer be the Monarch but only the President of the Monarchy.' La Fayette, as we shall see later, went further still and aimed at a Republic for France. So, concludes Montjoie, the American War brought all the ensuing disasters on France. 'The expenses into which Louis XVI was drawn upset all his plans for economy, checked the progress of his improvements and rendered useless . . . all the reforms to which he had devoted himself.'

Louis XVI bitterly realized this himself. Nine years later, in the thick of the Revolution, he told Bertrand de Molleville that he never thought of the American War without regret: 'They took advantage of my youth at the time,' he said: 'we are paying for it to-day.'

The Comte de Provence, in referring to the part played by the Queen, wrote long afterwards:

'Marie Antoinette had by nature very good judgement and, above all, rightness of perception. The protection accorded to a people which sought to throw off the yoke of its legitimate Sovereign seemed to her as unjust as it was impolitic, and if she had been believed, France would never have entered into that American War which exhausted her blood and treasure and from which she reaped no fruit but the principles which served as a basis to her infernal Revolution and the deficit which provided at the same time the pretext and the means.'<sup>1</sup>

France, destined hereafter to ceaseless unrest, paid indeed heavily. When the war ended in 1783, the American Republic was established, but the French Monarchy was lost, and with it all hope of peace and stability for that unhappy country.

<sup>1</sup> Comte de Provence, 'Réflexions Historiques sur Marie Antoinette,' in *Revue des Deux Mondes*, July 15, 1904, p. 241.

## CHAPTER XIII

### TRIANON

THROUGHOUT the events described in the foregoing chapters Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette remained more than ever united; the happiness begun with the birth of Madame Royale continued unbroken. In January 1780 the Chevalier de Lisle wrote to the Prince de Ligne: 'The King shows himself every day a good husband, a good father, a good man, one cannot see him without loving him sincerely and without respecting in him probity personified; I assure you we are very fortunate to have that pair on our throne, may Heaven that placed them there in His goodness maintain them long on it.' <sup>1</sup>

The people of Paris echoed the same wish. During the severe winter of 1783-1784 that followed after the war, the King and Queen did all in their power to relieve distress. As soon as the bitter weather set in Marie Antoinette sent five hundred louis from her privy purse for distribution amongst the poor, and such was the enthusiasm excited by her liberalities that the Parisians made a pyramid of snow at the end of the Rue du Coq-Saint-Honoré on which this verse was affixed:

'Reine, dont la bonté surpasse les appas,  
Près d'un roi bienfaisant occupe ici la place,  
Si ce monument frêle est de neige et de glace,  
Nos cœurs pour toi ne le sont pas' <sup>2</sup>

Alas! their feelings melted like the snow! In another

<sup>1</sup> Lucien Perey, *Histoire d'une Grande Dame au XVIII<sup>ème</sup> Siècle. la Princesse Hélène de Ligne*, p 260

<sup>2</sup> Montjoie, *Histoire de Marie Antoinette*, 1. 136.

part of Paris, near the Louvre, an enormous obelisk of snow was erected to the King, bearing this inscription :

‘Louis, les indigents que ta bonté protège,  
Ne peuvent t’élèver qu’un monument de neige;  
Mais il plait davantage à ton cœur généreux,  
Que le marbre payé du pain des malheureux’

This scene, says the contemporary Le Riche, ‘took place on January 21, 1784. Who could have believed then that on January 21, 1793, this same people of Paris would calmly see their father, their benefactor, their friend and their King immolated by regicides?’<sup>1</sup>

Often during that winter Louis XVI, walking in the Avenue de Versailles, would watch the sledges, made for the Queen’s pleasure, pass loaded with wood for the poor of Paris, paid for out of his privy purse. ‘There are my sledges!’ he would say with a sigh.<sup>2</sup>

No historian has described this aspect of Louis XVI more touchingly than the Socialist Louis Blanc, when, referring to the King’s goodness during 1788-1789, he says: ‘The calamities of a recent winter had left a remembrance of his benevolence which made many a shattered heart beat under the rags. During the severe cold of 1783 had he not ordered distributions of wood that he supervised himself? Had he not allowed the poor to come into the château, to go into the kitchens and warm themselves, to take away braised meat and soup?’<sup>3</sup>

According to Mme Campan the King gave away no less than 3,000,000 livres (£131,250) during this winter of 1783-1784, and the Queen between 200,000 (£8,750) and 300,000 (£13,125), which she ordered to be distributed by her women amongst poor families known to them or by the head of the police, the priests of Paris or the sisters of charity. At the same time she made Madame Royale herself give away part of the sums allotted to her for charities, and deprived both the little princess and the Dauphin of New

<sup>1</sup> Le Riche, *Histoire des Jacobins* (1795), II. 177.      <sup>2</sup> D’Allonville, I. 216.

<sup>3</sup> L. Blanc, *Histoire de la Révolution Française*, III. 171.

Year's presents, explaining to them that the money she intended spending on them had gone to buy blankets, bread and clothes for the poor.

Who remembers these things to-day? Their memory has long since been effaced by industrious historians conjuring up visions of Marie Antoinette dashing perpetually to Paris, frittering away vast sums on clothes and jewels, even at Trianon tying up pet lambs with costly ribbons and shearing them with golden scissors. Yet such follies as she committed belong almost exclusively to the years of 1775 to 1780, and even then how grossly have they been exaggerated! After that date the pace at which she lived steadily slowed down, her gambling nights were few and far between, instead of Paris gaieties the peace of the Petit Trianon absorbed her. Trianon indeed may be taken as the symbol of that new phase on which she entered after the birth of the Dauphin, and when the American War ended it was there she spent most of her days. The years 1783 to 1785 were the happiest—indeed the only happy—years she knew as Queen. Gone was the craving for excitement, her longing for motherhood was fulfilled, Louis XVI remained tender and devoted. The change that took place in her dress was symbolic of her mood, instead of costly silks and gorgeous brocades the Queen wore simple gowns of muslin and cambric which admirably set off her fair beauty. And at this the people of Paris who had complained of her extravagance now complained that she was ruining the silk weavers of Lyon and failing to keep up the dignity of the throne. When Mme Vigée le Brun painted her in a long coat of muslin—known as a *gaulle*—the public declared that she had sat for her portrait in a chemise and the picture had to be removed from the Salon.

Moreover, this simple style of dressing did not effect the economy that had been expected. Mlle Bertin saw to that! For, in the researches made by M. Pierre de Nolhac, it is noted that from that date the dressmakers' bills mounted steadily until they reached their peak year in 1786 with a





In 1778 the Temple de l'Amour, that exquisite round temple with its Corinthian pillars surrounding a statue of Eros by Bouchardon, was erected in the midst of the English garden, and in the same year the Belvedere arose on the little hill at the back of the château amidst clumps of roses, jasmine and myrtle—there the Queen, on summer mornings, would take her breakfast at a grey marble table whence she could survey all points of her domain.

In laying out her flower-beds Marie Antoinette had the advice of the best gardener of her day—the Prince de Ligne, who at his lovely Bel Œil had created a Paradise on earth and who wrote this delightful reflection: 'Un jardin est un royaume où le Prince n'est jamais hai et où il jouit de tout le bien qu'il fait. [A garden is a kingdom where the prince is never hated and where he enjoys all the good he does]' Of the Petit Trianon the Prince de Ligne wrote, 'there is nothing trumpery, nothing distorted, nothing bizarre, all its forms are agreeable, everything is perfect and in tone,' only one flower-bed was too 'ribbon-like' in shape, that must be altered—one can imagine the pleasant hours spent in discussion of these details.

Now, after the birth of the Queen's children, the Petit Trianon became more than a refuge from ceremony and the garden more than a delightful hobby, for here Marie Antoinette could come and watch the little princess and her brother at play on the grass, fondling their pet goats and digging in their gardens. It was then that a new idea came to her, and the charming *hameau*, or model village, sprang up on the other side of the lake at the end of the English garden.

The vogue for pastoral life had received its impetus from that friend of the Prince de Ligne, the Chevalier de Boufflers, whose romance of *Aline Reine de Golconde* twenty years earlier had fired Mme de Pompadour with a desire to emulate the little milkmaid by dressing up in the corselet and white petticoat of Aline and keeping cows in a rustic farm at Trianon. This idea, which had never materialized under Louis XV, recurred now to the mind of Marie

Antoinette, and in 1782 the little village was begun. Six years went by before it stood complete with its eight little thatched cottages, its model farm and dairy, and the 'Tour de Marlborough,' called after the old French song 'Marlbrouck s'en va-t-en guerre,' crooned by the aptly named *nourrice* of the Dauphin, the handsome Mme Poitrine.

It has been said that in the *hameau* the royal family played at being villagers, the King as miller, the Queen as the farmer's wife, the Comte de Provence as schoolmaster; but this legend finds no confirmation in fact. What we know is that at Trianon the simplest dress was *de rigueur*—a gown of white cambric with a muslin fichu and a shady straw hat bound with blue or lilac ribbon, and that Marie Antoinette thus attired spent long summer afternoons in the *hameau* and amused herself milking her beautiful Swiss cows, Brunette and Blanchette, into bowls of fine porcelain, feeding her chickens and pigeons and watering her flowers. What more innocent amusement could be imagined? Yet this too became a subject of calumny, and still to-day the Queen is represented as ruining France for the gratification of a selfish whim.

Now, in the first place, how could money be better spent than on a model farm and village? In our day royal personages rightly set an example and win respect by breeding prize cattle and exhibiting at shows. Moreover, was Marie Antoinette's *hameau* a purely selfish pastime? According to contemporary evidence the model cottages were not reserved for the amusement of the royal family, but in 1785 twelve poor families were installed there and maintained at the Queen's expense. This incident, carefully suppressed by most historians, is dismissed as a legend by M. Desjardins in his book on Trianon without any ostensible reason. But how can we disregard the positive assertions of four such contemporaries as Weber, Montjoie, Nougaret and d'Allonville? 'In the midst of her pleasures,' says Montjoie, the Queen 'sought to draw near to humble folk, she would have liked always to be surrounded by them. The King

having made her a present of the Petit Trianon, she ordered a village to be built there in which she lodged twelve poor families whom she often visited, and each of her visits was accompanied by some liberality.' <sup>1</sup>

The English contemporary John Adolphus, writing in 1799, refers to the same incident, quoting Nougaret, whose evidence, if it had been inaccurate, Adolphus would certainly have been in a position to discover. <sup>2</sup>

Apart from this the Queen did not keep the Petit Trianon to herself, for every Sunday it was thrown open to the public and all persons decently dressed, particularly children, were welcomed; sometimes a rustic ball was given in which Marie Antoinette took part, opening the ball herself with a quadrille. <sup>3</sup>

As to the fabulous sums supposed to have been spent on the Petit Trianon and brought against the Queen at her trial, we know now how much these amounted to, since the accounts for the work done have been preserved and published. Inside the château no structural alterations were made, but exquisite decorations were added by the great artists of the day; these cost approximately 250,000 livres (£10,937). The total cost of buildings, including the *hameau*, did not amount to quite 500,000 livres (£21,875). The Temple de l'Amour cost exactly 51,593 livres 7 deniers (about £2,257); the Belvedere 65,000 livres (£2,843). M. de la Rocheterie calculated that the total spent during the course of fifteen years, from 1776 to 1790, did not exceed at the most 2,000,000 livres (£87,500). <sup>4</sup> What was this compared to the sums wasted by the rich financiers of the day, as for example the recently ennobled Marquis de Brunoy of the family of Pâris-Duverney, who spent 10,000,000 livres (£437,500) on follies in his park and château? <sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Histoire de Marie Antoinette*, 1 91 Cf. *Mémoires de Weber*, 1 75, d'Allonville,

1 197

<sup>2</sup> *Biographical Memoirs of the French Revolution* (1799), 1 17, quoting Nougaret, *Anecdotes du Règne de Louis XVI* (1791 edition), 1 35, 275.

<sup>3</sup> Rocheterie, 1 307

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 1 328, and foll.

<sup>5</sup> Baronne d'Oberkirch, *Mémoires*, 1. 213, and II. 61.

Whatever sums were spent by Marie Antoinette at Trianon and also on the embellishment of Fontainebleau, who can say that they were wasted? For by the exquisite taste the young Queen displayed and her wise choice of architects, sculptors, decorators, and painters she made a priceless contribution to art, so that, as M. de la Rocheterie observes, the style that has been called Louis XVI should really be called Marie Antoinette, for it was she who inspired it. By all this she not only gave untold pleasure in her day to rich and poor alike, but she left a great gift to posterity. Still to-day the little château stands, a marvel of art, for all beholders, still to-day the people of Paris wander round the enchanted garden that the Queen loved, still they gaze in wonder across the lake at her pathetic *hameau*, and peep through the dusty casement windows of her house—from which it is whispered that she has been seen to look out—and still on the grass around the Temple de l'Amour the children play as once her children played. Who that has passed a few summer hours in this dream-world will say that a sou too much was spent on its creation?

No one has drawn a more vivid picture of Trianon in the time of Marie Antoinette than the Baronne d'Oberkirch. In May 1782 the Grand Duke and Duchess Paul of Russia, travelling as the Comte and Comtesse du Nord, arrived at Versailles and were magnificently entertained by the Court at a series of fêtes and spectacles, which included a performance of the Chevalier de Boufflers' *Aline Reine de Golconde*, which had been made into an opera. Amongst their suite was the Baronne d'Oberkirch, whose *Mémoires* are of priceless value to those who care to feel what it was like to live during those last years of the French monarchy. It is thus that Mme d'Oberkirch writes:

'May 23. Early in the morning I went to see the Queen's Petit Trianon. Mon Dieu, what a charming walk! how delicious were these thickets scented with lilac and peopled with nightingales! The weather was magnificent, the air filled with perfumed vapours; butterflies spread their golden



wings in the rays of the spring sun. I have never lived through more enchanting moments in my life than the three hours spent in visiting this retreat. The Queen spent most of the fine season of the year there, and I can well understand it.'

The Baronne d'Oberkirch was in France again in 1784 when Gustavus III of Sweden, travelling as the Comte de Haga, arrived on June 7 with a retinue of Swedes, including the Comte de Fersen.

Fersen had returned from America in 1783, and as a reward for their services with the French army he and another Swede, the Comte de Stedingk, each asked the King of Sweden to obtain for them the command of a French regiment. Gustavus III accordingly wrote a letter to Louis XVI which Fersen presented to him in person and afterwards wrote to his master saying: 'The King consented at once and showed the greatest desire to do something agreeable to your Majesty; the Queen showed herself willing to concern herself with it [*a bien voulu s'en mêler*] as soon as she knew that you wished it; all goes well and I think I can assure your Majesty that I shall have the Royal Suédois regiment,' etc.<sup>1</sup> Gustavus III also wrote in favour of Stedingk and Marie Antoinette answered both his letters.<sup>2</sup> Yet although we have it here on Fersen's own evidence that the Queen only concerned herself in the matter to meet the wishes of Field-Marshal Fersen and the King of Sweden, this incident is again quoted as evidence that she was in love with Fersen!

Marie Antoinette, as we know, particularly concerned herself with military appointments and went out of her way to be agreeable to foreigners, especially to Swedes. What then more natural than that Marie Antoinette should find pleasure in telling Gustavus III that his request on behalf of the two young Swedes had been acceded to by Louis XVI? It was again at the request of Gustavus III that in the follow-

<sup>1</sup> A. Geffroy, *Gustave III et la Cour de France*, 1 349, 362.

<sup>2</sup> *Lettres de Marie Antoinette*, 1 233, and II 25.

ing year Fersen received a pension of 20,000 livres from the French Government in recognition of his services.<sup>1</sup> The appointment to the regiment of the Royal Suédois did not, however, necessitate Fersen remaining in France, and he continued to travel about with his royal master as aide-de-camp. It was in this capacity that he came with him to Versailles in June 1784.

The Baronne d'Oberkirch writes an amusing account of this visit. The arrival of the King of Sweden was apparently unexpected; the "Comte de Haga" burst on the Court like a bomb.' Louis XVI, who was out hunting, had to be fetched back hurriedly. In their haste to change him into the ceremonious dress required for the occasion his valets made a terrible muddle of it, and the Queen, who was entertaining the King of Sweden with her usual charm and dignity, was distressed to see her husband enter with one gold shoe-buckle and one silver, with a velvet waistcoat suitable for mid-winter and his hair powdered only on one side. Both kings, however, laughed heartily at the misadventure, and Gustavus III was delighted with his royal host. 'Louis XVI,' he said later, 'is the best and most benevolent prince in existence. His soul radiates serenity. I am filled with admiration.'

The result of this visit was a *rapprochement* between France and Sweden, and on the 19th of July the two monarchs signed a treaty of alliance. The Queen took her share in this *entente cordiale*, entertaining Gustavus III at a magnificent fête in the gardens of the Petit Trianon, lit up for the occasion with coloured lights which, as the King of Sweden declared, turned it into a real fairyland, worthy of the Elysian Fields.

At this moment, however, Marie Antoinette was mainly concerned with the cares of motherhood. The little Dauphin, now three years old, had already shown signs of the disease that was slowly to undermine his health and to end fatally five years later. But a new joy came to Marie Antoinette in

<sup>1</sup> *Lettres de Marie Antoinette*, II. 27, note.

the spring of 1785, for on March 27 she gave birth to a second son, the little Duc de Normandie, a large and lusty infant, unhappily destined to survive his brother and to become the Dauphin and finally the unfortunate Louis XVII.

It was on this occasion that the King made Marie Antoinette a present of Saint-Cloud under circumstances seldom explained by historians. The château of Versailles was badly in need of repairs, and the celebrated architect, Mique, was ordered to submit a plan and estimate for carrying out the work required. Mique calculated that it would occupy a period of ten years, during which another royal residence would be required. Marly and Fontainebleau were both too large and formal—palaces in which life was as ceremonious as at Versailles; the Petit Trianon and the château de la Muette, both diminutive, could not accommodate the King's growing family and their retinues. A moderate-sized country house, where life could be lived simply, represented the Queen's desires. It was then she bethought herself of Saint-Cloud, one of the estates belonging to the Duc d'Orléans, where the air was particularly recommended by the doctors as likely to improve the Dauphin's health.

In the end Mique's estimate for the repairs at Versailles proved too high, and Louis XVI observed that as the sum exceeded the resources of the royal Treasury the work must be put off till 1790 and finished by the end of the century. At the same time he favoured the idea of Saint-Cloud as a property belonging to the Queen, much as a dower-house might be provided in our country. The Duc d'Orléans was quite prepared to sell it. Accordingly Saint-Cloud was bought by the King for the price of six million francs (£262,500), but at the same time he sold the royal château of La Trompette near Bordeaux for precisely this sum, so that in the end Saint-Cloud cost little extra.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless the fact of its presentation to the Queen excited violent resentment, and from this time Marie Antoinette came to be known as Mme Déficit.

<sup>1</sup> Rocheterie, 1 550; John Adolphus, *op. cit.*, 1. 28.



The tide of calumny now grew in volume. During the past six years, since the birth of Madame Royale, a series of pornographic libels had emanated from unknown sources : in 1779 the *Portefeuille d'un Talon Rouge*, purporting to refute these libels but with the real object of circulating them; then *Les Amours de Charlot et Toinette*, representing the Comte d'Artois as the Queen's lover ; in 1780 a filthy pamphlet entitled *Le Pou* (the Louse); in 1781 the King found on his mantelpiece a brochure full of venom called *Vie Privée d'Antoinette*. This was followed by the *Essai Historique sur la Vie de Marie Antoinette*, republished again and again up till 1789, of which the following words, placed in the mouth of Marie Antoinette, will serve as a sample :

'Catherine de Medicis, Cleopatra, Agrippina, Messalina, my crimes surpass yours, and if the memory of your infamous horrors still cause to shudder, if their fearful details make one's hair stand on end and one's tears to flow, what feelings will be aroused by a knowledge of the cruel and lascivious life of Marie Antoinette of Austria and what furies can be compared to her?

'A barbarous queen, an adulterous spouse, soiled with crimes and debaucheries, these are the titles which adorn me and which are not bestowed by malice; equity assigns them to me. . . . Without pity for the unfortunate, never did public misery excite in me compassion,' etc. etc.

Insane as were these ravings, their effect on the minds of the people was beginning to be felt. When after the birth of the Duc de Normandie the Queen made her entrance into Paris on May 24, to return thanks at Notre-Dame and Sainte-Geneviève, the people on whom she had bestowed liberal alms received her so coldly that she said sadly on entering the Tuileries: 'But what then have I done to them?' The author of the *Correspondance Secrète*, who relates this incident, attributes it to the flood of 'clandestine and libellous writings and licentious songs, couplets and satires, emanating even from the Court, which had changed the amiable character of the French.'

It was thus that the greatest joys of Marie Antoinette's life were tinged with sadness; 'I have never known her,' said the Prince de Ligne, 'to have one perfectly happy day.'

And now this summer of 1785 there came a thunder-bolt from the blue sky.

It happened that early in the same year, 1785, the Court jeweller, Aubert, had been struck down with paralysis, and Bohmer—formerly jeweller to Mme du Barry—from whom Marie Antoinette had bought the famous earrings and bracelets ten years earlier and who had entered into partnership with another German Jew named Bassenge, bethought himself of buying the post as Aubert's successor. Accordingly Bohmer and Bassenge now became jewellers to the Court, which gave them certain rights of *entrée*.<sup>1</sup>

This man Bohmer had been giving the Queen trouble ever since her accession over a diamond necklace he wanted her to buy. In the time of Louis XV he had spent years collecting the most marvellous stones all over Europe, in order to make what was known as a slave collar that he hoped to sell to Mme du Barry. But the death of Louis XV frustrated this plan, and Bohmer was left with the necklace on his hands which he had almost ruined himself to form. After trying in vain to sell it to the Court of Spain, Bohmer offered it to Marie Antoinette soon after she became Queen. But though she was unable to resist the earrings and bracelets she declined to buy the necklace at its enormous price of 1,600,000 livres (£70,000). To all the pleadings and persuasions of the jeweller the King and Queen both replied firmly: 'We have more need of a ship than of a jewel.'<sup>2</sup>

Bohmer, who was heavily in debt for the necklace, having borrowed 800,000 livres from the financier Baudard de Sainte-James, again tried to dispose of it to one of the Courts of Europe, but without success. According to Mme Campan, Louis XVI—now so much in love with his wife that he

<sup>1</sup> Lescure, *Correspondance Secrète*, 1 548, Campan, p 209.

<sup>2</sup> Campan, p 209, note, Funck-Brentano, *L'Affaire du Collier*, p 172.

would have drained his privy purse to the last sou in order to give her pleasure—actually offered it to the Queen, but she replied that she could not think of incurring such an expense, that she had enough diamonds already, and that as they were now worn only four or five times a year at the Court the necklace must be sent back to Bohmer.

The jeweller, however, returned again to the charge a few years later, and requested a further audience of the Queen. Marie Antoinette, who had her little daughter with her at the moment, allowed him to be admitted, not knowing the object of his visit. Bohmer then flung himself on his knees, with clasped hands, before the Queen, and bursting into tears cried: 'Madame, I shall be ruined and dishonoured if you do not buy my necklace. I cannot survive so many misfortunes. From here, Madame, I shall go and throw myself into the river.'

'Get up, Bohmer,' Marie Antoinette said severely, 'I do not like these heroics. Honest people do not have to beg on their knees. I shall be sorry if you kill yourself, but I shall be in no way responsible for your death. Not only I never ordered the thing that causes your despair, but every time you have spoken to me of the beauties of this collection I have told you that I would not add four diamonds to those I have already. I have refused your necklace; the King was willing to give it to me, and I made the same refusal; never speak of it to me again. Try to break it up and sell it and do not drown yourself. I am much displeased with you for making this scene in my presence and before this child. Never let such a thing happen again. And now go out.'<sup>1</sup>

Bohmer departed chastened, and it was hoped that no more would be heard of the matter. For some time the Queen avoided seeing him, but, hearing through the financier Sainte-James that the jeweller was still trying desperately to sell the necklace, she told Mme Campan to ask him at the first opportunity whether he had succeeded in finding a

<sup>1</sup> Campan, p. 209

buyer. Mme Campan, meeting him a few days later, made this enquiry, to which Bohmer replied that he was very happy as he had sold the necklace to the Sultan at Constantinople for his favourite wife. The Queen was delighted to think she would be importuned no more in the matter, and when Bohmer and Bassenge had become the Court jewellers she gave them some earrings to remount for her entry into Paris after the birth of the Duc de Normandie. The King and Queen also ordered from them some diamond epaulets and buckles as a birthday present to the little Duc d'Angoulême, eldest son of the Comte d'Artois. On the 12th of July, Bohmer came to deliver these ornaments to the Queen, and at the same time he handed her a note which she did not open immediately owing to her attention being diverted at the moment by the entry of Necker. Marie Antoinette therefore returned with it in her hand to her *petits appartements* and, after reading it, went into her little library where she found Mme Campan and told her she had just received an extraordinary letter from Bohmer complimenting her on the beauty of her diamonds and begging her not to forget him. Bohmer, she added, must be off his head to write in such a way. 'You are good at solving riddles,' she said to Mme Campan, 'perhaps you may be able to discover what this means.' Then, after reading the note aloud to her, the Queen observed that it was not worth keeping, and holding the paper out to a lighted candle that happened to be on the table, she burnt it in the flame—a hasty action she was afterwards to regret.

But although the note was destroyed its contents have been handed down to us in the copy kept by Bohmer and preserved in the Archives of Paris. It ran as follows:

'MADAME,—We are overwhelmed with happiness at daring to think that the last arrangements proposed to us, and to which we submitted with zeal and respect, are a new proof of our submission and devotion to the orders of your Majesty, and we feel a real satisfaction at the thought that

the most beautiful diamond ornament (*parure*) which exists will be of service to the greatest and the best of Queens.' <sup>1</sup>

If Marie Antoinette could not make head or tail of this missive it is hardly surprising. How could she suppose it related to the necklace which Bohmer had told Mme Campan he had sold to the Sultan in Constantinople? Had the man got some other diamond ornament he hoped she would buy and which he was already congratulating her on possessing? 'This man exists to torment me,' she said impatiently to Mme Campan, 'he always has some silly idea in his head.' Completely bewildered, she sent for Bohmer, but he had already left the château. Mme Campan asked whether she should send for him to her house; the Queen replied no, the less one had to do with such a man the better, it would be enough to ask for an explanation next time Mme Campan met him. 'When you see him again,' she said, 'remember to tell him that I no longer care for diamonds, that I shall never buy any more all my life, and that if I had any money to spend I would use it to enlarge my property at Saint-Cloud—get that well into his head.'

It is evident that neither the Queen nor Mme Campan attached any importance to the note, and it was not until three weeks later that the matter was again brought to their minds.

Marie Antoinette at this moment had pleasanter things to think of than the vagaries of the Court jeweller. On the 1st of August she went to the Petit Trianon for three or four weeks, and on the same day Mme Campan set off for her country house at Crespy to spend a short holiday with her father-in-law. This stay at Trianon was like a perpetual *bal champêtre*; the seigneurs and ladies of the Court danced in a tent erected in the garden, and the Queen, dressed in white cambric, added the finishing touch to the pastoral scene. Marie Antoinette was also busy preparing for the play that was to be acted in her little theatre at Trianon—

<sup>1</sup> Funck-Brentano, *L'Affaire du Collier*, p. 219.

the *Barbier de Séville*, by Beaumarchais—and in which she herself was to play the leading part.

In order to explain why this choice was made it is necessary to go back to the spring of that year. The *Mariage de Figaro* of Beaumarchais had been, since 1781, the subject of heated controversy in Paris and at the Court. As a skit on the society of the day, it might, a century earlier, have passed as no more dangerous than the comedies of Molière, but now that revolutionary ideas were in the air, the satires levelled at the pretensions of noble birth and the weaknesses of the great were charged with dynamite. The King saw this immediately and forbade performance of the play.

Society, however, seeing no reason why it should not laugh at itself, clamoured for the ban to be removed, and the Comte de Vaudreuil succeeded in persuading Louis XVI to let him put it on at the theatre of his country house. This was the thin end of the wedge, and finally, the King having been assured that certain excisions had been made in the text, which he believed would take the sting out of the play and ensure its failure, gave permission for it to be performed in public at the Théâtre Français on April 27, 1784. But the piece had been less carefully bowdlerized than the King supposed and its success was terrific. It seems probable that Beaumarchais was not at heart a subversive and had no idea of contributing to the overthrow of the whole existing order; he wrote as a satirist without any definite political purpose. Overwhelmed in his turn by satires and attacked in the press by the secretary of the Académie, Suart, he retorted with a letter in the *Journal de Paris* saying that as he had been obliged to fight lions and tigers in order to get his play produced he would not be reduced to beating 'the vile insect of the night,' in other words a louse. Thereupon the Comte de Provence, who had been backing Suart's attacks, went to Louis XVI to complain of Beaumarchais' insolence, assuring him that in speaking of lions and tigers Beaumarchais was referring to the King and Queen.

Louis XVI was playing cards at the time, and being

already annoyed by the success of the *Mariage de Figaro*, the idea that Beaumarchais had made such a comparison threw him into one of his rare fits of temper, and it is said that, without leaving the card table, he wrote in pencil on a seven of spades an order to arrest Beaumarchais and imprison him, not even at the Bastille, but at Saint-Lazare. The order was carried out, but after the unhappy author had been detained in this common prison for five days, the King realized that a wrong construction had been put on Beaumarchais' reference to lions and tigers, and that he himself had acted too hastily; in fact, that in having him arrested he had committed an unjustifiably arbitrary act—the only one, observes Beaumarchais' biographer, M. de Loménie, which he personally committed throughout his whole reign. After all, Beaumarchais had rendered important services to France during the American War and deserved some consideration. It was therefore to make up to him for the unduly harsh way in which he had treated him that Louis XVI, after ordering his release, allowed his play, not the *Mariage de Figaro* but the *Barbier de Séville*, to be acted at Trianon, and that the Queen, as a delicate compliment to the author, played in it herself.<sup>1</sup>

Marie Antoinette was fond of acting. Without any marked dramatic talent, she found the same enjoyment in dressing up, in pretending to be someone else—preferably a peasant, a *soubrette*, a simple girl of the people—that she had found formerly in putting on a mask at the Opera balls. It was one way of ceasing for a while to be a Queen. Hence the rôle of Rosine appealed to her, although with her majestic figure she was hardly suited to play the part of the 'jolie petite mignonne' described by Figaro. Unhappily there was no one to tell her she was making a mistake by appearing in this guise on the stage, and that even before an audience small and carefully chosen, a Queen must always remain a Queen.

It was on the 3rd of August, whilst learning her part, that

<sup>1</sup> L. de Loménie, *Beaumarchais et son Temps*, II. 365, 369.

Marie Antoinette was told Bohmer had arrived at Trianon and wished for an interview, saying that he had been sent by Mme Campan. 'The man is mad,' answered the Queen, 'tell him I have nothing to say to him and I will not see him.' A few days later, feeling the need of Mme Campan to help her repeat her words in the play, she sent to Crespy for her. The faithful waiting-woman therefore returned to Trianon on the 7th and found her royal mistress seated on the sofa in her little boudoir. After discussing the play Marie Antoinette said suddenly: 'Do you know that idiot Bohmer came to see me, saying he had been sent by you? I refused to see him. Do you know what he wants?'

Mme Campan, taken aback by this question, hesitated for a reply, then on being pressed by the Queen she told her story. Bohmer had said that she, the Queen, had made a secret purchase of the necklace, had commissioned the Cardinal de Rohan to buy it for her, that a first payment of 30,000 livres had been made to him, and notes signed by the Queen were in his possession.

This wild rigmarole seemed pure nonsense. Marie Antoinette listened, completely mystified. 'It was like a maze for her,' says Mme Campan, 'her mind lost itself in it.' At that moment she had no conception of the magnitude of what was happening, and that from the light comedy of Beaumarchais lying on her lap she had passed into the first Act of the great tragedy in which she was to play the leading part.



## CHAPTER XIV

### CAGLIOSTRO

IN order to understand what led up to this memorable conversation on the 7th of August 1785 in the Queen's little boudoir at Trianon it is necessary to go back some years and to penetrate into the 'shadowy sanctuaries' of occult intrigue so ably described by Louis Blanc. For, although the investigation of hidden causes behind the French Revolution does not enter into the general scope of this book, the famous 'Affair of the Necklace' is not only banal but completely unintelligible when viewed merely from the surface. The story, as usually told, with a wealth of details on the personalities of the gang of adventurers who made away with the necklace, falls into the category of clever jewel robberies we read of in the press to-day; the interest as well as the explanation of the whole affair lies in an examination of the secret forces at work behind the intrigue, which raise it from the history of a common swindle to an episode of extraordinary psychological interest.

Throughout the eighteenth century secret societies had grown steadily in number and in power; I have related the history of all this elsewhere and need not recapitulate it here.<sup>1</sup> Suffice it only to give a short summary of events.

In 1771 the Lodge of the Amis Réunis was founded by Savalette de Langes—'man of all the mysteries and of all the plots.'<sup>2</sup>

In 1772 the Grand Orient of France was founded with the Duc de Chartres, later Duc d'Orléans, at its head.

On May 1, 1776, the Order of Illuminati was founded by Weishaupt.

<sup>1</sup> *Secret Societies and Subversive Movements* (1924), chaps. v. and vi.

<sup>2</sup> G. Lenôtre, *Vieilles Maisons, Vieux Papiers*, 1<sup>ère</sup> Série, 1. 92.



On July 16, 1782, the great Congress of Freemasons, Illuminati and members of the Stricte Observance took place at Wilhelmsbad.

Freemasonry had now become the rage in Paris. The campaign of libels against Marie Antoinette coincided with this phase. However rancorous her private enemies—such as the Comte de Provence, Mme Adélaïde, the Duc d'Aiguillon, and later the Duc d'Orléans—may have been, could they alone have organized this flood of calumny poured forth from unknown sources with unfailing regularity as at a common word of command? M. Louis Dasté, in his admirable study of the question, provides the clue: 'From 1774 to 1783, without relenting, Masonry had been covering Marie Antoinette with the mire of its pamphlets.' <sup>1</sup>

The Queen, however, had no suspicion whence these libels emanated. When her friend, the Princesse de Lamballe, joined the form of women's Masonry practised in the Loges d'Adoption and in February 1781 was made Grand Mistress, Marie Antoinette was delighted to think that an association had been formed to second her own charitable efforts. In the autumn of the same year she wrote to her friend:

'I have read with interest what was done in the masonic lodges over which you amused us so much; I see that they do not only make pretty songs and that they also do good. Your lodges have followed in our track by delivering prisoners and making marriages for girls; that will not prevent us giving dowries to ours and placing the children on our lists; the protégés of good M. de Penthievre will be the first provided for.' <sup>2</sup>

Perhaps in this case Marie Antoinette was not mistaken, for the Maçonnerie d'Adoption was not real Masonry at all but only a sort of playing at Masonry, with a ritual of its own devised to amuse the women of society. And no doubt the Princesse de Lamballe had been able to infuse it with

<sup>1</sup> Louis Dasté, *Marie Antoinette et le Complot Maçonique* (1910), p. 69

<sup>2</sup> Autograph letter, the property of Mme Firmin Didot, copied by me from the original at the exhibition of 'Marie Antoinette et sa Cour' at Versailles in May 1927.

the spirit of her benevolent father-in-law, the Duc de Penthièvre, with whom she had worked to relieve distress, as 'the good angel' on his estates.

The error of Marie Antoinette was to imagine that all Freemasonry was equally innocuous. In answer to the warnings of her sister Marie Christine, Duchess of Saxe-Teschen, she wrote: 'Everyone belongs to it, all that goes on in it is known; where then is the danger?'<sup>1</sup> And again she says: 'The policy of the Government is to let Freemasonry spread, for it is only a society of benevolence and pleasure. . . . It is in no way a society of avowed atheists, since, I have been told, God is on all their lips; they bring up children charitably. . . .'<sup>2</sup>

Nine years later it was the turn of Marie Antoinette to warn her brother of the dangers of the association she had so innocently defended.

It seems that a year or two earlier Louis XVI received a like warning, but he, too, was to repent his incredulity and cry with bitter regret: 'Why did not I believe what was told me eleven years ago about all that I am experiencing to-day?'<sup>3</sup>

There can be no doubt, however, that the great majority of French Freemasons at this date knew little or nothing of the subversive designs entertained by the leaders; the real initiates kept their secret to themselves. Behind the Lodges of the Freemasons and the Illuminati moved the men of mystery of whom we can only catch glimpses here and there, and whose real identity even to this day remains unknown.

Outside this inner and most secret circle were a number of lesser mystery men who astounded Europe by their wonders. Amongst these was the so-called magician Cagliostro, the only one who need concern us here, for it is in following his career that we find the clue to the Affair of the Necklace.

Joseph Balsamo, the son of a converted Sicilian Jew, was

<sup>1</sup> Gaston Maugras, *Le Duc de Lauzun et la Cour de Marie Antoinette* (1907), ii. 315.

<sup>2</sup> Dasté, *op cit*, p. 60

<sup>3</sup> Abbé Barruel, *Mémoires sur la Jacobinisme* (1819), ii. 333; iv. 299.

born in 1743 at Palermo. His father, a small tradesman in that town, died when Joseph was quite young, and the boy was confided to the care of monks known as the Ben Fratelli, who placed him under their apothecary, which enabled him to acquire a certain knowledge of chemistry. Joseph, however, proved unmanageable, and ended by escaping from the convent to the house of his uncle in Palermo. With a natural aptitude for science he studied botany, medicine, developed a talent for ventriloquism, and ended by acquiring a reputation for supernatural powers and for having been in communication with spirits. But it was principally in the art of swindling that young Balsamo distinguished himself, forging theatre tickets, falsifying a will and robbing the uncle with whom he lodged. Finally, a fraud practised on another Jew, named Marano, who threatened to kill him, forced him to fly from Sicily and start on travels about the world.

In Messina he seems to have come in touch with one of the real initiates, the mysterious Altotas—sometimes identified with the equally mysterious Kolmer, indoctrinator of Weishaupt—with whom he travelled to Egypt, where he was said to have been initiated into secret wisdom inside the Great Pyramid. From there the pair went to Malta, where Altotas died—or disappeared—and Balsamo continued his travels alone. Whilst in Rome, in 1770, he married a young and charming girl named Lorenza Feliciani, and took her with him to London in 1771 or 1772, where he described himself as a painter named Bacthymore and lodged in New Compton Street.<sup>1</sup> After various wanderings about Europe—in France, Belgium, Italy, etc.—he returned with his wife to London again in 1776. Balsamo now professed to be a Cabbalist, an alchemist, to be able to increase the size of stones, to restore youth and so on. It was also said that he could ‘give to cotton the lustre of silk,’<sup>2</sup> which suggests that in some way he had anticipated the artificial silk of our own

<sup>1</sup> *Archives Nationales, Affaire du Collier*, x. 2 B, 1417.

<sup>2</sup> *Archives du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, France. Mémoires et Documents*, 1400, date of 1786, report headed September 24, 1786, p. 316.

day. Through these pretensions he succeeded in swindling large sums out of a credulous Quaker lady in Chelsea, named Mrs. Fry, by making her believe that he could divine the numbers that would turn up in a lottery and increase the size of the stones of a magnificent diamond necklace he persuaded her to buy, and entrust to him for the purpose. For these frauds he was arrested, brought to trial and even imprisoned, but after being made to return the necklace he managed in the end to get off by falsely swearing that no money had been handed to him.<sup>1</sup>

But the most important incident in Balsamo's second visit to London was described by him as his initiation into Freemasonry. This did not take place in any lodge under the obedience of Grand Lodge of England. Kenneth Mackenzie describes it as the *Espérance Lodge*, No. 289, held at the King's Tavern in April 1776.<sup>2</sup> But no such lodge is found in the list of British lodges existing at that time. British Freemasons merely regarded Balsamo with derision. Mark Grand Lodge at the present time possesses a print of a picture by Hogarth depicting an after-dinner scene in which 'Count Balsamo' is being denounced as an impostor, a cheat and a swindler.<sup>3</sup> Another point that proves the lodge could not have been a British one is that according to Balsamo's own account his wife was initiated with him—into all three Craft degrees on the same night!—whilst the obligations and ceremonies he describes are not those of British Masonry.<sup>4</sup> In fact, he himself admitted later that the Order into which he was initiated was a Hermetic Order known as the *Haute Observance*, professing to concern itself with the secrets of nature and the philosopher's stone, but aiming ultimately at the same ends as the *Illuminati* of Bavaria.

<sup>1</sup> *Archives du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, France. Mémoires et Documents*, 1400, date of 1786, report headed September 24, 1786, p. 316, and *Vie de Joseph Balsamo* (1791), pp. 34 and foll.

<sup>2</sup> *Masonic Cyclopaedia*, article on Cagliostro, p. 94.

<sup>3</sup> Communicated by Lt.-Colonel Cecil Powney, P.G.D.

<sup>4</sup> *Vie de Joseph Balsamo*, pp. 90-93.

It seems to have been now that Balsamo adopted the name of Comte de Cagliostro, and, abandoning the rôle of mere charlatan, he acquired a reputation as a high initiate in occult mysteries, on which he declares that he obtained further information from a manuscript by one George Coston or Cofton that he found on a London bookstall. It was on this he founded his system of Egyptian Masonry for which he had been prepared inside the Great Pyramid.<sup>1</sup>

As a Freemason, a 'Rose-Croix' and, later on, 'Grand Cophte' of the Egyptian Rite, Cagliostro became *persona grata* in the various lodges of Europe when once more he embarked on his travels. At the Hague and Leipzig he met members of the Stricte Observance and was entertained at banquets in the lodges, at Mitau he came across disciples of Scieffert and even of the Rabbi Falk—perhaps the greatest of all mystery men; in St. Petersburg he found lodges both of the Haute and Stricte Observance led by another mystery man known as Thomas Ximenes; finally in Frankfurt he was initiated into the Illuminati of Weishaupt.<sup>2</sup>

This ceremony took place in an underground chamber just outside the town and must be described in Cagliostro's own words. Led by two heads of the sect, he says:

'We entered a round chamber in the middle of which I saw a table; this was opened and underneath was an iron box which again was opened and inside I perceived a quantity of papers. These two people took from amongst them a manuscript book in the form of a missal at the beginning of which was written: We Grand Masters of the Templars, etc. These words were followed by a form of oath, conceived in the most horrible terms which I cannot remember but which contained the obligation to destroy all despotic sovereigns. This formula was written in blood and had eleven signatures besides my cypher which came first; all this was written in blood. . . . These signatures were those of the twelve Grand Masters of the Illuminati, but in reality my cypher had not been written by me and

<sup>1</sup> *Vie de Joseph Balsamo*, pp. 93, 116.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 116, 119-121, 125-129.

I do not know how it came there. What they told me about the contents of this book . . . confirmed me in the belief that this sect had determined to deal its first blows on France, that after the fall of that monarchy, it would strike at Italy and particularly Rome, that Ximenes who has already been mentioned was one of the principal heads, that the plot was now at its height and that the society had a great quantity of money dispersed in the banks of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, London, Genoa and Venice. They told me that this came from the subscriptions of 80,000 masons, contributing five louis each. . . . Finally they offered me help in money telling me they were ready even to give me their blood, and I received 600 louis down.’<sup>1</sup>

All this might seem the outcome of a fevered imagination were it not confirmed by other evidence, notably by that of so prosaic a personage as Mirabeau, who during his secret mission to Berlin in 1786 reported in a letter to Talleyrand that ‘the Illuminati were gaining ground in the most terrifying manner.’<sup>2</sup> Mirabeau went on to say.

‘With regard to this I will reveal an anecdote to you which happened recently—during the last days of Frederick II—and which it is infinitely important for my safety as long as I am here, should be kept secret. The irrevocable authenticity of this you will be able to judge for yourself, and it will show you whither leads the supposed theory of visionaries linked with the Rose Croix Masons whom some of us regard with pity and others only with amusement.’

Mirabeau then relates that two zealous Freemasons who thought they perceived advantages in masonic associations, the one for his ambition, the other for humanity, were told by their superiors that they were now to be rewarded for their zeal by initiation into the highest degrees. But the ceremony to which each was subjected, in separate places, was that of the Illuminati, and Mirabeau describes this in detail, adding the form of oath which Cagliostro omitted

<sup>1</sup> *Vie de Joseph Balsamo*, pp. 129-132

<sup>2</sup> Henri Welschinger, *La Mission Secrète de Mirabeau à Berlin* (1900), p. 394.



from his account but is of the first importance in elucidating the Affair of the Necklace. This oath, says Mirabeau, 'consisted in the promise to reveal to the Head of the Order all secrets which might be confided to him or discovered by him, to explore everything that it was necessary to know, to employ, if necessary, poison or the sword, *to render imbecile* those whose lives it is imprudent to attempt, to honour the *aqua nefaria*, to submit all religion, all promises, all duties, all feelings to the decisions of the Head, to contract no engagement, no relations, no bargain without his consent, to give the power of death to whoever can convict one of having betrayed the secrets that have been confided.'

This oath, Mirabeau adds, so froze the veins of the two Freemasons with horror that each in his turn rose up and declared that he refused to take it.<sup>1</sup>

Much the same account of this ceremony is given in the *Essai sur la Secte des Illuminés* by the Marquis de Luchet, to whom Mirabeau no doubt communicated the story. Hence perhaps the reason that Mirabeau was said to be the author of this brochure which appeared early in 1789.

To return to Cagliostro. After his initiation by the Illuminati outside Frankfurt, Cagliostro relates that he went back to the town, and the next day set forth with his wife for Strasbourg, where he arrived on September 19, 1780. Here he remained three years, attending to the sick and apparently effecting some marvellous cures. Such was the reputation he now acquired that his house was continually besieged by people afflicted with every kind of disease, as many as a hundred being sometimes assembled in his waiting-room.

The remarkable appearance Cagliostro now presented no doubt enhanced his reputation as a miracle-worker. Of medium height, with an olive complexion, wide nostrils, a short thick neck and piercing prominent eyes, he took his walks abroad dressed in a coat of grey taffeta braided with gold, a scarlet embroidered waistcoat, red breeches, varie-

<sup>1</sup> Welschinger, *op. cit.*, p. 396.

gated silk stockings flecked with gold, diamond buckles on his shoes, more diamonds and rubies flashing on his fingers, and on the lace of his jabot, a triple watch-chain of diamonds from which hung a number of diamond ornaments. These stones were all of a prodigious size, 'worth a king's ransom,' unless, as the Baronne d'Oberkirch suspected, they were merely paste. Cagliostro professed to have produced them himself by the alchemical methods known to him.

The credulity displayed by the public with regard to Cagliostro's miraculous remedies passes belief. Amongst these remedies was an elixir for restoring youth; one dose sufficed to take twenty years off one's age. A Dutch newspaper in 1787 seriously related an incident demonstrating its unfailing efficacy. A coquettish old lady, anxious to regain her lost youth, begged Cagliostro for a phial of the famous elixir. Unfortunately it arrived when she was out, and her maid, aged twenty-five, drank the contents, with the result that when the old lady returned she found a little girl of five running about her room in garments far too large for her. So, instead of regaining her youth, the old coquette lost her lady's-maid.<sup>1</sup>

The Prince de Ligne, on his way through Strasbourg, curious to see the miracle-worker, obtained an interview by playing a trick on him. 'I brought him a sham invalid,' he says, 'he gave him a dose of his yellow liquor, and after relating that he had cured the whole seraglio of the Emperor of Morocco, he told me that when he was not sure of curing someone who was desperately ill he lifted his eyes to Heaven and said: "Great God, so blasphemed by Rousseau and Voltaire, you have a servant in the Comte de Cagliostro, do not abandon the Comte de Cagliostro!" Then God came to his assistance.'<sup>2</sup>

The Baronne d'Oberkirch, who met Cagliostro in Strasbourg, declares that he 'only cured people who had nothing the matter with them or those whose imagination was strong enough to aid the remedy.' In modern language, he cured

<sup>1</sup> Funck-Brentano, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

<sup>2</sup> Prince de Ligne, *Mémoires*, p. 83.

sometimes by 'suggestion.' There can be no doubt that Cagliostro was possessed of remarkable hypnotic power. Even Mme d'Oberkirch is obliged to admit that he exercised a certain fascination. 'He had a glance of almost supernatural depth, I cannot describe the expression of his eyes, it was at the same time fire and ice, he attracted and repelled, he inspired fear and at the same time an unsurmountable curiosity.' <sup>1</sup>

During his stay in Strasbourg, Cagliostro, whilst apparently concerned only with the healing of the sick and other miraculous operations, kept closely in touch with the secret societies. There were several lodges of the Stricte Observance in that town, and the initiates belonging to these came to visit Cagliostro, who indoctrinated them with his Egyptian Masonry.

Now Strasbourg since 1704 had been the diocese of the Cardinals de Rohan. Four Cardinals of this name had followed each other in unbroken succession as Bishops of Strasbourg, and held their court at their magnificent château of Saverne in the neighbourhood. At the time of Cagliostro's arrival in 1780, the prelate destined to be known to history as the Cardinal Collier (Necklace Cardinal) had just succeeded to the bishopric.

Louis René Edouard, Prince de Rohan Guéménée, was born in Paris in 1734. After entering the Church he became, at the age of twenty-two, coadjutor to his uncle, the Cardinal-Bishop of Strasbourg, and it was in this capacity, his uncle being ill, that he received Marie Antoinette on her arrival in France as a child of fourteen at Strasbourg, and entertained her to a magnificent ball and banquet at Saverne.

In 1772 the Prince Louis—as he was then called—went to Vienna as French ambassador, but deeply displeased Maria Theresa by his scandalous behaviour. 'He is a very *mauvais sujet*,' the Empress wrote to Mercy soon after his arrival, 'without talents, prudence or morals; he upholds very badly the character of Minister and of ecclesiastic.' <sup>2</sup> This was

<sup>1</sup> Baronne d'Oberkirch, *Mémoires*, II 106. <sup>2</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, I 289.

the man who, in the report already quoted (see ante, p. 169), dared to accuse Marie Antoinette of a tendency to coquetry. The truth seems to be that, like Lauzun, the Cardinal had conceived a passion for her and, having met with a rebuff, revenged himself by imputations on her character. According to Mme de la Motte he actually declared that during his Embassy in Vienna, emboldened by the frivolity of her manners, he had made advances which were not repelled, but as Marie Antoinette was not in Vienna at the time, having left to become Dauphine of France two years earlier, this lie could deceive no one. It must, therefore, have been on her arrival in France in 1770, or when the Cardinal went to pay his respects to her before starting for Vienna, that his passion began, and, piqued by her coldness on these two occasions, he wrote the aforesaid report. From that date onwards he never ceased spreading libels against her.<sup>1</sup> But his worst offence in her eyes was to have made fun of her mother in a letter read aloud, amidst shrieks of laughter, by Mme du Barry at one of her supper parties. When, therefore, at Maria Theresa's request he left the Embassy in Vienna and returned to Versailles in 1774, after the accession of Louis XVI, the Queen received him freezingly. Yet she was unable to prevent his being made Grand Almoner of France in 1777 through the persistence of his cousin Mme de Marsan. 'The post that Rohan is to occupy distresses me,' wrote Maria Theresa to her daughter when the news reached her, 'he is a cruel enemy not only for you but on account of his principles, which are most perverted. Beneath an easy, affable and engaging exterior, he did a great deal of harm here and yet I am obliged to see him beside the King and you!' 'I think just like my dear mother about the Prince Louis,' Marie Antoinette replied, 'I believe his principles are very bad and that he is very dangerous on account of his intrigues; if it had depended on me he would have had no post here.'<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> J. Munier Jolain, *Le Cardinal Collier et Marie Antoinette* (1927), p. 109.

<sup>2</sup> *Marie Thérèse et Mercy*, III. 30.

But the Queen was again unable to prevent his being made a Cardinal in the following year, this time through the influence of Maurepas. In 1779 he succeeded his uncle as Bishop of Strasbourg, and took up his residence at Saverne.

Although enormously rich, with an income of two and a half million francs (over £109,000) a year, the Cardinal, owing partly to a fire at his château of Saverne but mainly through his life of extravagance and dissipation, had got heavily into debt. 'Henceforth,' says his latest biographer M. Munier Jolain, 'he surrounded himself with financiers, above all with Jews, the Cerf-Beers of Strasbourg, good lenders at a high rate of interest. The Prince of the Church concerned himself with "ameliorating the conditions of their race." The Rabbis fêted him and attended on him.'<sup>1</sup>

It is easy to imagine that in these circumstances a miracle-worker, who could cover himself with gigantic diamonds of his own making, might interest the Cardinal. At any rate he sent Cagliostro a message saying he would like to make his acquaintance. But Cagliostro was clever enough to profess reluctance to meet his Eminence, which only whetted the Cardinal's curiosity still further, and he was obliged to develop an attack of asthma, which finally brought the miracle-worker to his bedside and led to his admission to Cagliostro's house in Strasbourg.

From this moment the Cardinal fell completely under the spell of Cagliostro.

Now, although it seems to have been the Cardinal who made the first advance, it is impossible not to question whether this meeting was as fortuitous as it appeared. Can it be altogether a coincidence that Cagliostro, who had been initiated into the Illuminati, had, by his own confession, sworn with terrible oaths to take part in a plot to destroy the French Monarchy and to deal the next blow at Rome, and been sent forth, provided with six hundred louis, to carry out his instructions, should the very next day have set forth for Strasbourg where a Prince of the Church and a

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 139.

'cruel enemy' of the Queen of France was to be found? Is it not permissible at least to suggest that Cagliostro was sent to Strasbourg in order to capture the mind of the Cardinal and so prepare the way for the double blow on throne and altar? At any rate this is what happened. Cagliostro's display of wealth, paid for by the Illuminati, had the effect of attracting the Cardinal's attention—directed to it perhaps by some of his entourage. Cagliostro could afford to feign reluctance. After this first step had been taken and the Cardinal drawn into the net, Cagliostro proceeded by flattery. 'Your soul,' he said one day to his princely dupe, 'is worthy of mine and you deserve to be the confidant of all my secrets.'<sup>1</sup> The Cardinal, enchanted at the prospect, invited Cagliostro to come and take up his abode at Saverne, where he carried on his alchemical operations under the eyes of the Cardinal, making gold and precious stones for his patron.

The Baronne d'Oberkirch describes a visit she paid to the Cardinal in his episcopal palace at this date—1780—where she found him surrounded with his usual magnificence; no less than fourteen *maîtres d'hôtels* and twenty-five footmen were in attendance. Hardly had the conversation begun when both folding-doors were flung open and an usher announced: 'His Excellency the Comte de Cagliostro!'

The miracle-worker, resplendent in his paste diamonds, entered and fixed Mme d'Oberkirch with eyes that she says went through her like a gimlet. It was then that she realized all the magnetic power of Cagliostro, yet marvelled at the spell he exercised over the Cardinal de Rohan. A little later, when dining with him at his palace, the Prince Louis gravely showed her a solitaire ring he wore on his finger set with a diamond worth at least 20,000 livres, declaring that he had seen it made by Cagliostro in his crucible. And as Mme d'Oberkirch looked 'stupefied,' the Cardinal went on to say:

'That is not all, he makes gold; he made in front of me five or six thousand livres' worth, up there in the attics of

<sup>1</sup> Funck-Brentano, *op cit*, p 94

the palace. I shall have more still, I shall have a great deal; he will make me the richest prince in Europe.' For all this, the Cardinal went on to say, Cagliostro had asked him nothing, absolutely nothing.

'Ah, monseigneur!' cried the Baronne, 'this man must count on extorting very dangerous sacrifices from you if he buys your confidence so dearly. In your place I should have a care; he will lead you far.'

The Cardinal replied only with an incredulous smile. In his palace he had erected a bust of the magician, on the base of which were engraved the words: 'The divine Cagliostro.' Later he was to declare: 'Cagliostro is God Himself.'<sup>1</sup>

How are we to account for this aberration? Mme d'Oberkirch declared that 'there was in Cagliostro a demoniacal power, that he fascinated the mind and quelled reflection.' But when we remember the oath of the Illuminati enjoining the initiate to employ the power of rendering *imbecile*, it would appear that certain of their adepts had acquired the art of capturing the mind and destroying all power of thought. This is certainly what Cagliostro did to the Cardinal de Rohan. From the time he fell under the influence of the magician the Cardinal became imbecile.

But here we come to a further link with the secret societies. In September 1781 there arrived at Strasbourg a certain Marquise de Boulainvilliers, whose husband was the grandson of the famous Jewish banker Samuel Bernard, created a Chevalier by Louis XIV in return for the financial aid he had rendered to the crown. His grandson on his marriage bought the estate of Boulainvilliers, from which he took his title. Now, the Marquis de Boulainvilliers was a member of the Stricte Observance and also a Freemason of the Lodge of the Amis Réunis, controlled by a secret committee directing the activities of the various sects of Illuminati and Illuminés.<sup>2</sup> It was indeed the very hub of revolution. And

<sup>1</sup> Funck-Brentano, *op cit*, p. 96, Costa de Beauregard, *Le Roman d'un Royaliste* (1892), p. 46

<sup>2</sup> Munier Jolain, *op cit*, p. 148, Lenôtre, *Vieilles Maisons, Vieux Papiers*, i 92.

M. Gustave Bord, in his highly documented researches on Freemasonry in the eighteenth century, asserts that the Affair of the Necklace was organized by the Stricte Observance and the Amis Réunis in the hotel of the Boulainvilliers at Passy.<sup>1</sup> How far the Marquise was in the plot it is impossible to say, all we know is that it was she who introduced Mme de la Motte to the Cardinal de Rohan.

Jeanne de Saint-Rémy de Valois, now known as the Comtesse de la Motte, was really a descendant of the Valois through an illegitimate son of Henri II. But the family had become so poor that at the age of seven Jeanne and her little sister used to be sent out by their parents to beg in the streets. The Marquise de Boulainvilliers took pity on them and the two children were placed in a school at Passy, and later in a convent. Jeanne grew up into an attractive girl with fine blue eyes under dark well-arched brows, an enchanting smile and a skin of dazzling whiteness. But her early misfortunes had imbued her with a grudge against society and a contempt for all recognized laws of morality. Whilst the two girls were living under the protection of Mme de Surmont at Bar-sur-Aube, the nephew of Monsieur de Surmont, a young officer named Marc Antoine de la Motte, frequently came to the house. Although ugly and penniless, with no marked talent beyond that of running into debt, La Motte succeeded in winning the affections of Jeanne de Saint-Rémy, who was now twenty-four, and the pair were married in June 1780. A month later Mme de la Motte gave birth to twins, who lived, however, only for a few days. Jeanne for a while retired into a convent, and her husband returned to his old occupation of making debts. In September 1781 the couple were living together again, now calling themselves the Comte and Comtesse de la Motte—a title to which they had no right whatever—when they heard that Jeanne's old benefactress, the Marquise de Boulainvilliers, was on her way through Strasbourg and

<sup>1</sup> G. Bord, 'La Conspiration Révolutionnaire de 1789,' in *Le Correspondant* for May 1906, p. 526.



being entertained by the Cardinal de Rohan at Saverne. Thereupon they immediately set off for Strasbourg. Mme de Boulainvilliers received them kindly and promised to present them to the Cardinal. Whilst driving out with her a few days later they happened to meet the Cardinal on the highroad between Strasbourg and Saverne; Mme de Boulainvilliers made a sign to him to stop; the Cardinal immediately descended from his carriage and Mme de Boulainvilliers introduced her protégée as Mlle de Valois—a name calculated to impress him—explaining that in spite of her illustrious origin the lady was absolutely penniless. The *beaux yeux* of Jeanne were, however, more potent than her royal blood as a means of enlisting the Cardinal's sympathy, and the La Mottes immediately received an invitation to Saverne. There, seated humbly on a stool before his Eminence, Mme de la Motte, making full use of her large blue eyes and bringing her enchanting smile into play, poured forth her troubles. The Cardinal promised, on his return to Paris, to do all he could to help the couple; meanwhile he introduced them to Cagliostro.

The La Mottes then left Strasbourg with Mme de Boulainvilliers, Jeanne returning to her convent, her husband to his regiment, but, before parting, the Marquise gave Mme de la Motte injunctions to join her in Paris two months later. At the end of this same year of 1781 Cagliostro also went to Paris with the Cardinal, who lodged him in splendour at his palace, and during the fortnight he remained there his days were passed in attending to the sick, already attracted in vast numbers by his reputation for miraculous healing. He was unable, however, to cure the Marquise de Boulainvilliers, who fell ill of smallpox and died in December. Jeanne de la Motte meanwhile had arrived in Paris at the end of November and, according to her account, remained with her benefactress to the end.

The La Mottes were now in a slightly better position, for Mme de Boulainvilliers had paid off La Motte's debts and got him into the Guards of the Comte d'Artois. After her

death they settled in a small apartment at Versailles and, although still miserably poor, contrived soon afterwards to take rooms also at a cheap hotel, the Ville de Reims, in the Rue de la Verrerie in Paris. That in the state of their finances they should have occupied two apartments seems inexplicable; the reason given by M. Funck-Brentano is that Mme de la Motte wished to be near the Court of Versailles in order to get into touch with Ministers and other influential people. Why did she wish this? What had this obscure adventuress to hope for from the Court? Was there already some dark intrigue on foot?

Directly after the death of the Marquise de Boulainvilliers Mme de la Motte had written to the Cardinal de Rohan reminding him of his promise to help her and asking for an audience. The Cardinal granted this request, and further meetings followed, then came gifts of money, which the Cardinal declared he was able to dispense as King's Almoner, at other times as loans from his private purse.

By the end of 1782 the La Mottes were heavily in debt and obliged to leave their small hotel, the Ville de Reims, but this did not prevent them taking another apartment in the Rue Neuve-Saint-Gilles. In order to meet their creditors a fresh appeal was made to the Cardinal, who borrowed the necessary sum from the Jewish moneylender, Isaac Beer, whilst another Jew advanced the funds required for furniture. Was it only her *beaux yeux* that inspired these liberalities, or did Mme de la Motte appear to be the instrument needed for the execution of plans that were maturing in the background of events?

During those years of 1781-1785 the masonic plot was thickening. On July 16, 1782, an immense congress of Freemasons from all over the world took place at Wilhelmsbad, from which the Illuminati of Bavaria emerged triumphant, and a unification of masonic bodies under Weishaupt was effected. The Comte de Virieu, a young French noble who had been drawn into Freemasonry and even into Illuminism—deluded by its apparently humanitarian aims

—was deputed by Weishaupt himself to represent French Freemasonry at this famous congress. Full of zeal he started forth, but the disillusionment that awaited him was terrible. True to his oath he committed no record of what he had witnessed to paper, but from that time onward he could never hear Freemasonry spoken of without a shudder. After his return to Paris a friend, struck by his gravity, asked laughingly what tragic secrets he had brought back from Wilhelmsbad. 'I will not confide to you,' Virieu answered with a sadness that astounded his friend, 'I can only tell you that all this is much more serious than you think. The conspiracy that is being hatched has been so well planned that it will be so to speak impossible for the Monarchy and the Church to escape.' The Affair of the Necklace, observes de Virieu's biographer, M. Costa de Beauregard, 'soon came to justify this sinister prophecy' <sup>1</sup>

Another Freemason present at this terrible congress, the Graf von Haugwitz, representative of the Prussian lodges, declared forty years later: 'I acquired the firm conviction that the drama begun in 1787, the French Revolution, regicide with all its horrors, had not only been resolved on at the Congress of Wilhelmsbad but was the result of associations and oaths.' <sup>2</sup>

Cagliostro, whose mission was 'to work so as to turn Freemasonry in the direction of Weishaupt's aims,' soon after this set forth again on his travels. His task of capturing the mind of the Cardinal de Rohan had been successfully accomplished, and so completely had that prelate been subjugated that, in the words of his *vicaire* and *homme de confiance*, the Abbé Georgel, 'he had no will apart from that of Cagliostro.' Whenever his duties as Grand Almoner took him to Paris the Cardinal left one of his gentlemen, the Baron de Planta, in Alsace to attend to Cagliostro's wants, which he supplied by entertaining him and his wife to magnificent orgies at which imperial Tokay flowed freely.

<sup>1</sup> *Le Roman d'un Royaliste*, p. 43.

<sup>2</sup> N. Deschamps, *Les Sociétés Secrètes et la Société* (1882), II. 134.

So when the magician left Strasbourg in the middle of 1783, the Cardinal, in order to keep up contact, sent his young secretary, Ramon de Carbonnières, with him, to act as intermediary for correspondence. In this way he was able to consult Cagliostro on every step he took.

According to Cagliostro's own account he went first to Naples—according to the Abbé Georgel to Switzerland—but it is certain that in November of the same year he arrived at Bordeaux, where he remained eleven months, and that he then went on to Lyon, where he founded the Mother Lodge of his Egyptian masonry. It was now that he became known as the Grand Cophte.

But Cagliostro had only been three months in Lyon when he was obliged to start for Paris in order to join the Cardinal de Rohan, who needed his advice on a matter of urgent importance. The presence of the magician was absolutely essential at this crisis.

with the Queen.<sup>1</sup> In all these cases the culprits were brought quietly to book and no scandal was created.

Did these previous incidents suggest to Mme de la Motte the intrigue on which she then embarked, or were they earlier attempts made by invisible instigators to bring off a coup which failed on account of the discreet way each affair was handled, but which were now renewed by the same conspirators with better hopes of success?

At any rate, no more efficient instrument could have been found for carrying out an intrigue of this kind than Jeanne de la Motte-Valois. In response to the Cardinal's confidence she now undertook to get into touch with the Queen so as to plead his cause and hers, and from 1783 onwards she made every effort to attract her attention at the Court. In December of that year she brought off a fainting fit outside Madame Elizabeth's apartment at Versailles; the kind princess ordered her to be carried home, but an attempt to obtain an audience of her later aroused Madame Elizabeth's suspicions and she was dismissed as an intriguer. Another fainting fit on February 2, 1784, in the Galerie des Glaces as the Queen went by also proved abortive. Marie Antoinette did not even notice her; further faints, aggravated by nervous convulsions, under the Queen's windows again passed unobserved.

All efforts to establish a real contact with the Queen having failed, Mme de la Motte started on her plan of deceiving the Cardinal, from whom she had received nothing but benefits. Why she should have adopted this course, in view of the fact that he was her one source of revenue, is inexplicable unless she knew that she had more powerful support behind her. In other words, it is impossible not to question whether she was acting alone in this matter or whether she was instigated by agents of an occult power to set out on her hazardous enterprise. At any rate, in April 1784 she told the Cardinal that she had succeeded in attracting the Queen's attention by fainting at her feet and

<sup>1</sup> Campan, p. 120.

by this means had been accorded private interviews, that having gained her confidence she had spoken to the Queen of the great qualities of the Cardinal and had been able to dispel her prejudice against him. By way of proving the intimacy to which she had been admitted she showed him a number of little blue-bordered notes with the lilies of France at the corner which purported to be written by the Queen to her 'cousin'—Mme de la Motte-Valois.

The next step was to tell the Cardinal that he had only to write a justification of his conduct, addressed to the Queen, in order to receive a favourable reply and embark on a secret correspondence which the Queen was anxious to carry on through the medium of Mme de la Motte. The Cardinal, delighted, wrote out the required justification with immense care, tearing up innumerable rough copies before delivering it in its finished form to Mme de la Motte for presentation to the Queen, and his joy knew no bounds when a few days later he received a reply from her hands in the shape of a little gilt-edged note in which the Queen was represented as saying :

'I am charmed to find you no longer guilty. I cannot yet accord you the audience you desire. When circumstances permit I will let you know. Be discreet.'

From May 1784 onwards letters and answers succeeded each other continuously, Mme de la Motte employing for the purpose a young man named Rétaux de Villette, who had become her secretary—and, incidentally, her lover—who wrote a particularly fine hand which he was able to turn into a good imitation of the Queen's. Such was the docility of the Cardinal, or rather the state of imbecility to which he had been brought, that although he might have been expected to treasure these notes written, as he believed, by the woman he adored, he meekly allowed Mme de la Motte to destroy a number of them after he had read them. By these means Mme de la Motte planned that the whole correspondence should be burnt, so that nothing should remain to convict her of forgery.

M. Funck-Brentano, evidently taking the *Mémoires* of the

Abbé Georgel as his authority, has described the reading of the little blue-edged notes 'from the Queen,' carried out in great secrecy, by candlelight in the midst of the small committee composed of the Cardinal, the Baron de Planta and Mme de la Motte, but he also adds Cagliostro and Ramon de Carbonnières.

It seems, however, impossible that the two last-named could have been present at these séances, for Cagliostro was in Bordeaux and Lyon throughout this year of 1784 and did not come to Paris until January 1785. And the Abbé Georgel distinctly states that Ramon remained there with him. In saying that the Cardinal conferred with Cagliostro about his correspondence with the Queen, Georgel therefore evidently means that he did so by letter, presumably through Ramon, who continued in his rôle of intermediary. Thus, says Georgel, Cagliostro, who had become the Cardinal's 'oracle, his guide and his compass,' having been consulted on the matter of the Queen's supposed letters, 'guided the footsteps of the Cardinal in this unhappy affair,' and after having invoked 'the angel of light and the spirit of darkness he prophesied to the Cardinal that his fortunate correspondence would carry him to the highest point of favour, and that his influence in the government would become preponderant,' etc.<sup>1</sup>

Mme de la Motte now carried her intrigue a step further, and in the summer of 1784 a little gilt-edged note arrived saying that, although the Queen could not yet give the Cardinal public marks of her esteem, she was willing to grant him the audience he craved, 'and to tell him more than she could write about his return to her good graces.' The interview was to take place between eleven o'clock and midnight on a given date in a wooded walk below the terrace of the château of Versailles known as the Bosquet de Vénus. The Queen would then hand him a rose and a box containing her portrait, and the Cardinal would be able to 'express his sentiments of devotion without restraint.'

<sup>1</sup> Abbé Georgel, *Mémoires* (1817), II 51, 52

This missive naturally threw the Cardinal into a transport of delight; the improbability that the Queen of France would choose such a time and place for an audience does not seem to have occurred to him for a moment. Since he had fallen under the influence of Cagliostro he had surrendered all power of independent thought. Transported into the unreal world conjured up by the magician he saw only a vista of glorious possibilities opening out before his bewitched vision—soaring ambitions realized and favours heaped upon him by the hands of the divinity he had worshipped from afar.

Now there happened to be in the underworld of Paris a young milliner named Marie Nicole Leguay, who supplemented her honest livelihood by engaging in a less reputable profession. Simple, good-natured, stupid, but charming to look at, with her aquiline nose, blond cendré hair and large innocent blue eyes, Nicole bore so striking a resemblance to Marie Antoinette that her many adorers christened her 'the little Queen.'<sup>1</sup>

One afternoon in July 1784, when sitting in the garden of the Palais-Royal, Nicole observed a young man walking up and down in front of her and fixing his eyes on her. Finally he came and sat down on a chair close by, and continued to scrutinize her, looking her up and down as if to take her measurements. After they had met in this way several times, the man, who was no other than the 'Comte de la Motte,' opened conversation with her, and then one day followed her home and asked if he might come and pay his court to her. 'I could not take upon myself to refuse this permission,' says Mlle Nicole in her account of the affair.

We may question whether this meeting in the Palais-Royal was as accidental as it has been made to appear, for Nicole happened to look exactly the part that the La Mottes at that moment required someone to fill. It has been suggested that she was pointed out to them by Cagliostro, who,

<sup>1</sup> D'Allonville, 1. 189.



though absent from Paris, had heard about her—perhaps through a certain Jew named Nathan, to whom Nicole owed money and, we are told, ‘held her in his clutches [*entre les pattes*].’<sup>1</sup>

After La Motte had established relations—apparently of a quite innocent kind—with the little modiste, Nicole was surprised to receive a visit from a mysterious lady, who explained to her that she belonged to the Court and enjoyed all the confidence of the Queen. She had come to ask Mlle Nicole to render her Majesty a great service, in return for which she would receive 15,000 livres. Nicole, though completely bewildered by this request, said she would be proud to do it without any reward.

‘Then,’ said the lady, ‘Monsieur le Comte de la Motte will come and fetch you to-morrow evening in a carriage, and take you to Versailles.’

Accordingly, the following evening Mlle Nicole drove off to Versailles with the ‘Comte,’ and on arrival found the mysterious lady waiting at the gates of the château. Now for the first time she was told that this was the Comtesse de la Motte, of the royal house of Valois, and that she herself, Nicole, must bear a title. From this moment she was to be known as the Baronne d’Oliva, under which name she is referred to henceforth.

Nicole thought all this very absurd, but allowed herself to be carried off by the La Mottes to their lodgings in the Place Dauphine. According to her own account, she spent the night there, and not until the next evening did she know what she was required to do.

It was then, on August 11, 1784, that Mme de la Motte and her maid Rosalie dressed ‘Mlle d’Oliva’ for the part she was to play, in a white cambric gown exactly copied from the picture of Marie Antoinette in a *gaulle*, painted by Mme Vigée le Brun, which had excited so much indignation in the Salon of 1783. Then Mme de la Motte placed a note in her hand, saying: ‘I shall take you this evening

<sup>1</sup> Funck-Bientano, *op cit*, p. 152, *Deuxième Mémoire pour Mlle d’Oliva*, p. 13.

into the park [of the château] and you will give this letter to a very great seigneur whom you will meet there.'

Between eleven o'clock and midnight Mlle d'Oliva, with a long white cloak thrown round her shoulders and a cap known as a *thérèse* on her head, was led by the La Mottes through the grounds of the château down to the wooded walk known as the Bosquet de Vénus below the high wall of the terrace that supports the 'Hundred Steps.' The night was dark, no moon cast a ray of light on their path; d'Oliva and her companions were soon swallowed up in the shadows cast by the thick foliage of the trees. Then Mme de la Motte placed a rose in the hand of d'Oliva, saying:

'You will give this rose with the letter to the person who will appear before you, and you will only say: "You know what this means." The Queen will be there to see how the interview goes off. She will speak to you. She is there; she will be behind you. You will talk to her in a short time.'

These words threw little d'Oliva into such a state of panic that she trembled all over. How was she to address the Queen? 'Am I to say Queen, Madame, Sovereign or Majesty?' La Motte replied: 'You will always say Your Majesty.'

After a while the La Mottes retired into the background, leaving d'Oliva to await events.

Meanwhile the Cardinal, wrapped in a long blue cloak with a large hat drawn over his eyes, was pacing the terrace of the château with the Baron de Planta, waiting impatiently for the appointed hour. Suddenly Mme de la Motte appeared at his side saying. 'I have just come from the Queen, she is very vexed at not being able to have a long interview with you as Madame and the Comtesse d'Artois wished to walk with her this evening, but come down quickly into the Bosquet and she will see you for a moment and give you proofs of her good-will.' The Cardinal hastened down the steps in obedience to this summons. D'Oliva, still trembling from head to foot at the thought that the

Queen was watching her from behind, hardly knew now what she was doing. Apparently she dropped the rose at the feet of the man she never suspected to be the Cardinal de Rohan, forgot to hand him the letter, and, though she thought she repeated the phrase required of her: 'You know what this means,' the Cardinal imagined that he heard her murmur: 'You may hope that the past will be forgotten,' and his heart beat tumultuously at the words of forgiveness. But at this rapturous moment, when his wildest dreams seemed to have come true at last and the Cardinal was about to throw himself on his knees at the feet of his divinity, the alarm sounded from the background. From one side Rétaux de Villette, who had been hovering in the shadows, from another Mme de la Motte, rushed forward whispering: 'Quick, quick, hurry away, Madame and the Comtesse d'Artois are coming!' And d'Oliva found herself borne off by de la Motte, whilst the Cardinal, joined by Mme de la Motte and the Baron de Planta, retired cursing the unlucky contretemps that had cut short his happiness.

The La Mottes, taking d'Oliva with them, returned to Paris in the highest spirits, laughing triumphantly over the success of their enterprise. D'Oliva, put off with 4,268 livres instead of the promised 15,000, was soon dropped by her new acquaintances, who had no further use for her. It is clear that throughout she had no conception of the truth; it had not been difficult to make her play her part, because, as Mme de la Motte said, she was very stupid.

Such was the famous 'Scène du Bosquet.'

In spite of his momentary disappointment the Cardinal now felt he had every reason for satisfaction at the night's adventure. The Queen had spoken gracious words, had given him a rose—surely more than a symbol of forgiveness?—henceforth he could live in the hope of further favours. The next day another of the little gilt-edged notes reached him expressing regret that the interview in the Bosquet had not lasted longer.

So although the real Marie Antoinette, whom he saw

constantly in the course of his duties, never spoke a word to him but continued to treat him with the greatest coldness, it did not occur to him that he had been deceived. From this moment he trusted Mme de la Motte blindly and became as submissive to her orders as to those of Cagliostro.

When, therefore, a week or two later he received another 'letter from the Queen' asking for the sum of 60,000 livres to help an unfortunate family in distress, the Cardinal, completely deceived, took the Jew Cerf-Beer into his confidence, telling him that the required loan would bring great advantages to himself and to his race. The money was immediately forthcoming and handed over to Mme de la Motte, whose manner of living sensibly improved from that moment. This manoeuvre was repeated in November 1784 when the Cardinal, in obedience to advice given in one of 'the Queen's letters,' had gone back to Strasbourg. The Baron de Planta, who had been left in Paris to deal with this correspondence, forwarded the request which, again with the help of the Jew millionaire, was granted, and the money transferred through de Planta to Mme de la Motte.<sup>1</sup>

The reason for the advice given to the Cardinal concerning his temporary retirement to Strasbourg seems to be that at this juncture, Mme de la Motte, having bought a large house at Bar-sur-Aube and launched out into fresh expenses, was anxious to get him out of Paris. In the same month of November the Affair of the Necklace began.

Here, as throughout the whole course of this extraordinary story, it is impossible to know the real truth concerning the way the great affair started. According to M. Funck-Brentano the necklace was first mentioned in the salon of Mme de la Motte in the Rue Neuve-Saint-Gilles on November 29, 1784, when a certain Laporte, a lawyer, who helped the 'Comtesse' in her various enterprises, observed that as she was in so much favour with the Queen she might help poor Bohmer and Bassege to dispose of the ornament on which they had sunk so large a sum. Again we may wonder

<sup>1</sup> Georgel, *op. cit.*, II, 43

whether this was quite the 'happy thought' it had been represented. For if M. Gustave Bord is right in saying that the whole plot was elaborated at the hotel of the Marquis de Boulainvilliers at Passy, Mme de la Motte as the protégée of the Boulainvilliers and also as the *intime* of Cagliostro was in close touch with its real authors from the outset. At any rate, the audacity with which she set out on this most dangerous game of all again suggests that she counted on the support of powerful backers.

According to her own account, which does not at all tally with the one given by M. Funck-Brentano, no such conversation took place at her house in November, and the first she heard of the necklace was at the end of December, when Laporte and his father-in-law Achet brought Bassenge to see her, uninvited, and told her of his difficulties. The jeweller had brought the necklace with him and spread it out on the table for her to see. But Mme de la Motte, 'tired of their importunities,' told them she could do nothing in the matter. It was only afterwards she heard that Bassenge was one of the Court jewellers.

Here we come to a curious point. Every writer on the subject describes Bohmer and Bassenge as having been the Court jewellers all along. In reality Bohmer was at first merely jeweller to Mme du Barry, with a shop in the Place Vendôme, and it does not appear to have been until early in 1785, that is to say in the thick of the Affair of the Necklace, that he and his partner Bassenge became jewellers to the Queen. The news is thus announced in the *Correspondance Secrète* under the date of March 24, 1785:

'The Sieur Aubert, jeweller to the Crown, having had an attack of apoplexy which has paralysed half his body, the Queen has named in his place the Sieur Bohmer, husband of the famous Mlle Renaud, formerly jeweller to the King of Poland and then to the du Barry, whose fall almost ruined him. He is an amiable man, esteemed for his taste, his talents and for a politeness rare amongst members of his profession.'<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Lescure, *Correspondance Secrète*, 1 548.

Why should the Queen have elected Bohmer who, as she said, had been the torment of her life, to occupy this position? Mme Campan throws different light on the matter by saying that Bohmer bought the post.<sup>1</sup> The Queen, perhaps as a sop for not buying the necklace, therefore only allowed him to occupy it. It is evident that at this juncture it was of the first importance to the two partners to be known as jewellers to the Queen; in this capacity the story of her negotiations with them for the purchase of the necklace would be more readily believed. Their conduct throughout the whole affair was, as we shall see, *louche* in the extreme, and if they were in the plot from the beginning many points become clear which are otherwise inexplicable.

The Sieur Aubert's attack of apoplexy certainly occurred at a most opportune moment, for the author of the *Correspondance Secrète* is unlikely to have given news more than a few weeks old, so that it must have been in February or March, that is to say after the necklace had left their hands, that Bohmer acquired the post so valuable to the working out of the plot.

But to return to Mme de la Motte. Although she professed to have taken little interest in the necklace, she lost no time in dispatching a courier to the Cardinal, who was still in Alsace, bearing one of the familiar gilt-edged notes in which the Queen was represented as saying: 'The moment I desire has not yet arrived, but I am hastening your return for the purpose of a secret negotiation which interests me personally, and which I can only confide to you; Mme de la Motte will give you the clue to the enigma. . . .' Needless to say the Cardinal hurried back to Paris, where he arrived on January 5, 1785.

Mme de la Motte then told him the Queen had confided to her that she was very anxious to buy the famous necklace without the knowledge of the King, but that as her funds were low at the moment she wished to find an intermediary who would carry out the transaction on her behalf, and

<sup>1</sup> Campan, p 209.

arrange for payment to be made by instalments. In this predicament she had thought of the Cardinal, and now requested him to act for her in the matter.

The Cardinal actually believed this amazing story, backed up by another forged letter from the Queen, and eagerly entered into the plan proposed to him. Mme de la Motte then sent for the jewellers, and Bassenge, accompanied by Achet, came to her house on January 21. Mme de la Motte then told them that the Queen wished to buy the necklace and that a certain *grand seigneur* would be authorized to deal with them on behalf of her Majesty. But the whole matter must be carried out in the greatest secrecy, and the name of Mme de la Motte herself must not be mentioned. On the 24th she went to the jewellers and informed them that the Cardinal de Rohan would call on them in person to see the necklace. A moment later the Cardinal arrived at Böhmer's shop. His first feeling was one of surprise that a woman with a taste so restrained and exquisite as Marie Antoinette's should wish to possess this flamboyant ornament. But since it was her desire he went forward unquestioningly. On the 29th of January the jewellers came to the Cardinal's palace to settle the terms on which the purchase was to be made, and it was then arranged that the price of 1,600,000 livres (£70,000) should be paid in quarterly instalments of 400,000 livres throughout the course of two years, the first payment to fall due on August 1, 1785.

So far, however, the Cardinal had no authorization in writing to draw up the contract, and it is possible that he might have come to his senses before taking the final step if he had not at this moment again surrendered his reasoning powers under the personal influence of Cagliostro.

As soon as the proposals with regard to the necklace had been made to him by Mme de la Motte on his return to Paris, the Cardinal, who, as we have seen, had consulted Cagliostro at every turn during his supposed correspondence with the Queen, felt the need of more direct communication with the oracle than could be effected by letter. It was

thus that Cagliostro was summoned from Bordeaux to guide the Cardinal's footsteps throughout the great enterprise on which he had now embarked. On January 30 he arrived in Paris and put up at an hotel in the Palais-Royal before taking a house in the Rue Saint-Claude.

The Cardinal lost no time in seeking his guidance. Cagliostro 'mounted on his tripod; Egyptian invocations were made throughout a whole night illumined by a great quantity of candles in the Cardinal's own salon; the oracle, inspired by his familiar spirit, declared that the negotiation [concerning the necklace] was worthy of the Prince, that it would be a complete success, that it would place the seal on the Queen's favours and hasten the dawn of the happy day which would reveal, for the happiness of France and of humanity, the rare talents of the Cardinal.'<sup>1</sup>

This message from the spirit world dispelled the last doubts in the mind of the Cardinal, and such was the condition of imbecility he had reached under the hypnotic influence of the magician, that when Mme de la Motte now showed him an authorization to buy the necklace, supposed to have been written by the Queen and signed 'Marie Antoinette de France,' he never detected the deception. That this prince of ancient lineage, a Cardinal, a Bishop, Grand Almoner of France, an ex-ambassador, and besides all this a man of the world accustomed from his youth to the usages of the Court and of society, should overlook the fact that royal personages sign nothing but their Christian names and never that of their country, is so inconceivable that no historian has been able to explain it. Only by a realization of the occult power wielded by Cagliostro and the inner lodges of the Illuminati is it possible to understand the temporary suspension of the Cardinal's reasoning faculties. From this moment he hesitated no longer, and on February 1 the famous necklace was handed over to him by the jewellers.

According to the instructions of Mme de la Motte the case containing the necklace was to be delivered to her the same

<sup>1</sup> Georgel, *op. cit.*, II. 59.



day at her lodging in Versailles, whither the Queen would send a messenger to fetch it. Obedient to her orders the Cardinal, accompanied only by his valet Schreiber carrying the case, set out at dusk for Versailles. On arrival at the door the valet was dismissed, and the Cardinal with his costly burden entered the house alone. Mme de la Motte was waiting for him in a dimly-lit room which had an alcove with a glass panelled door opening into a small closet where her accomplice Rétaux de Villette was concealed. After a moment's pause a voice cried: 'From the Queen!' and through the semi-darkness there entered a tall dark young man dressed entirely in black, whom the Cardinal recognized as one who had sounded the alarm during the *Scène du Bosquet*. Mme de la Motte explained that this was the Queen's confidential footman bringing a letter from his royal mistress; in reality it was Rétaux made up to play the part. Taking the note from his hand she handed it to the Cardinal, who read it whilst the messenger, ordered to leave the room, waited outside the door. The note was an order from the Queen to deliver the necklace to the bearer. Then the Cardinal, nothing doubting, handed the precious case over to Mme de la Motte who, calling in the supposed footman, placed it in his hands and Rétaux departed with his booty. The fatal deed was done.

By way of completely reassuring the Cardinal, Mme de la Motte had now thought out a further ruse. Whilst watching the Queen pass through the *Galerie des Glaces* on her way to chapel, she had observed that Marie Antoinette habitually moved her head in a certain way as she went by the door of the hall known as the *Œil de Bœuf*, where the courtiers assembled. So in the evening of the same day she arranged with the Cardinal to meet her on the terrace of the château, and then told him that the Queen was enchanted to have received the necklace though she had not been able yet to write her acknowledgment, but if the Cardinal would stand next morning in the doorway of the *Œil de Bœuf* her Majesty would make a sign with her head to show that it

was safely in her hands. The Cardinal obeyed this injunction, and the Queen moving her head as usual, he retired convinced that the signal agreed on had been given.

From this moment he waited impatiently to see the gorgeous ornament flashing around the neck of the Queen. The jewellers also expressed impatience and, more than this, concern, as the days went by and the Queen appeared without this new adornment.

What had happened to the necklace? Rétaux, after leaving Mme de la Motte's lodging in Versailles with the case, handed it back to her the same night in Paris, and during the days that followed, the La Mottes, assisted by Rétaux, sat at a table between drawn blinds tearing the diamonds roughly from their settings. Then, when the whole gigantic *parure* had been broken up, Rétaux was sent out to sell the stones to various Jewish dealers. As bad luck would have it he struck an honest one named Adan, who went to the police and reported that a certain Rétaux de Villette had been the round of the merchants and the Jews, offering diamonds at so low a price that he suspected a robbery. He added that the said Rétaux was about to go off to Holland with the dealer Abraham Frank to dispose of the stones. On the strength of this information the police arrested Rétaux with his pockets full of diamonds. Mme de la Motte, however, prevented his imprisonment by declaring that they were diamonds of hers that he was authorized to sell. But the risk of offering the stones for sale in Paris had become apparent, and La Motte was sent over to London to sell them to jewellers in that city, which he did with considerable success. Mme de la Motte, however, succeeded in disposing of a certain number in Paris.

Now, in view of these happenings, how is it possible that neither Bohmer nor Bassenge discovered what happened to their necklace? If, as the dealer Adan stated, stones of such remarkable size and value were being hawked round amongst all the merchants in Paris in such a way as to excite his suspicion, and Mme de la Motte had been able to sell a

number to well-known Jewish dealers, how is it that they did not get wind of the theft? Diamond merchants, particularly when belonging to the same race, form something of a confraternity amongst whom certain stones are known; Bohmer and Bassenge, both as connoisseurs and Jews, must therefore surely have heard something of the mysterious deals in diamonds going on throughout these months of February to June. Yet instead of enquiring whether their necklace was safely in the hands of the Queen they did nothing. Even when the Cardinal asked them if they had not tendered their humble thanks to her for taking it off their hands and urged them to do so without delay, they made out that a suitable opportunity for approaching her Majesty had not yet arrived. So months went by until the 12th of July arrived, the day on which Bohmer delivered the diamond epaulets and buckles ordered by the King and Queen for the Duc d'Angoulême, and presented his cryptic note to Marie Antoinette, which she burnt in the flame of the candle.

By this time the first payment for the necklace was nearly due. In the natural course of things the whole secret would then come out, and Mme de la Motte would be arrested as a thief. How was it she dared to face this contingency? For the reason that she had all along determined it should never arise. Her plan was quite an ingenious one. When the time for payment drew near she intended to tell the jewellers herself that the signatures were forged and blackmail the Cardinal into settling their bill himself. The disgrace of having to admit that he had lent himself to this transaction would certainly ensure his silence. Any publicity might lead to an exposure of the whole affair—the clandestine correspondence he believed he was carrying on with the Queen, the *Scène du Bosquet*—apart from the scandal, what a fool he would be made to look in the eyes of the world! No, he would never face the music, but would pay up and say nothing. And Mme de la Motte would be able to enjoy her ill-gotten wealth undisturbed.

But for all her cleverness she had miscalculated, and things did not turn out quite as she anticipated.

By way of gaining time Mme de la Motte thought out a plan for putting off the day of payment by three months. The sale of the diamonds had brought in considerable sums, so that she was able to live in the greatest magnificence at Bar-sur-Aube. Out of the money at her disposal she then sent 30,000 livres to the Cardinal, telling him that the Queen found it impossible to make the first payment of 400,000 livres on the 1st of August as arranged, and the jewellers must be asked to wait until October 1st, when they would receive 700,000. Meanwhile the Queen sent them this 30,000 on account.

The Cardinal, who as usual believed her story, put this proposal before Bohmer and Bassenge on July 30. But the jewellers, whilst accepting the 30,000 livres, pressed for immediate payment of the larger sum. Then Mme de la Motte brought off her coup and sent a message to them saying that the Queen's signatures on the contract had been forged, and advising them to apply to the Cardinal for payment.

Instead of taking her advice, however, Bohmer told his story to Mme Campan. According to M. Funck-Brentano, Bohmer on the 3rd of August went to Versailles and asked for an audience of the Queen, but was only able to see Mme Campan, who told him he had been the victim of a swindle. This, however, is impossible, for, as we have seen, the Queen had left for Trianon on the 1st of August and Mme Campan had gone to the country house she shared with her father-in-law at Crespy. It seems, therefore, more probable that Mme Campan's account of what happened on that day is nearer the truth, and according to Mme Campan the jeweller professed to know nothing about the deception that had been practised on him. Bohmer, she says, was amongst the guests entertained to dinner by her father-in-law that Sunday of August 3, and this was her first opportunity to ask him what he had meant by his

note to the Queen three weeks earlier. Bohmer appeared petrified:

‘The Queen must surely know, Madame,’ he replied.

Mme Campan explained that she did not know, and thinking, as the Queen had done, that the note had related merely to some fresh purchase Bohmer wanted her to make, went on to say that the Queen was afraid of this, and that she wished him to know she would not add a single diamond to those she had already.

‘But what about my money?’ cried the jeweller.

‘Your account has been settled long ago.’

‘Ah, Madame, you are mistaken; I am owed a very large sum.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I must tell you everything. The Queen has made a mystery of it to you; but she has bought my great necklace.’

‘What? The necklace you tormented the Queen about for years! But she refused to buy it from you, and she refused it when the King wished to give it to her! Besides, you told me six months ago you had sold it to the Sultan at Constantinople!’

‘That was the answer the Queen ordered me to make to everyone who mentioned it to me.’

Then Bohmer went on to explain that the Queen had bought the necklace through the Cardinal de Rohan.

At this Mme Campan, more amazed than ever, cried out: ‘But she has not spoken a word to him since his return from Vienna, there is no one in greater disfavour at her Court. You have been robbed, my dear Bohmer, that is certain. You have been deceived.’

‘It is you who have been deceived, Madame, she sees him so much in private that she herself handed him the 30,000 francs that were given me on account and which, in his presence, she took out of the little Sèvres writing-table near the mantelpiece in her boudoir.’

‘The Cardinal told you that?’

‘Yes, Madame, he himself.’

Here Bohmer was clearly lying, for the Cardinal never pretended to have dealt directly with the Queen in the matter; all instructions had been conveyed to him by Mme de la Motte.

'These are all lies,' said Mme Campan, 'and you are very much to blame for carrying out transactions on behalf of the Queen without the King's knowledge after having taken an oath of fidelity to their persons in return for the post you hold.'

Bohmer now professed to feel anxious about the matter and asked Mme Campan what he should do.

Mme Campan advised him to go and see de Breteuil, the Minister of the King's Household, who had charge of the crown jewels, but instead of this he went to Trianon and asked to see the Queen, who refused to have him admitted. Mme Campan, thinking he had followed her advice, remained on for a few days at Crespy, leaving it—on the advice of her father-in-law—to the Minister to get to the bottom of the affair. Then the Queen sent for her to help her with the part of Rosine she was to play in the *Barbier de Séville*, and on the 7th of August Mme Campan arrived at Trianon. It was thus that the conversation described in an earlier chapter took place in the Queen's little boudoir and that Mme Campan related all that Bohmer had told her at Crespy. After she had recovered from her first amazement at this extraordinary story, Marie Antoinette sent for the jeweller, and the man having been shown into her boudoir, she asked what he meant by saying she had bought the necklace she had refused for so many years. Bohmer then gave the same account of the affair he had given Mme Campan, and disregarding the Queen's exclamations of surprise and indignation went on repeating: 'Madame, it is no use pretending any longer; deign to admit that you have my necklace and come to my help, or else my bankruptcy will bring everything to light'

The indignity of being obliged to listen to these words—practically an accusation of theft brought against her by the

wretched jeweller who had been 'the torment of her life'—threw Marie Antoinette into a frenzy of despair and indignation, but secure in her innocence her one idea was to give the affair the utmost publicity and to show up the Cardinal de Rohan, whom she believed to be the principal villain of the plot. 'These hideous vices must be unmasked,' she said afterwards to Mme Campan, 'when the Roman purple only conceals a swindler who dares to compromise the wife of his sovereign, all France, all Europe must know it.'

But Mme Campan is wrong in saying that the Queen then consulted the Abbé de Vermond and the Baron de Breteuil who, as the enemies of the Cardinal, fanned the flame of her wrath against him. From her own correspondence we know that she only consulted the King.<sup>1</sup> On the 12th of August the jewellers submitted their case in writing and on the 14th Louis XVI came to spend Sunday at Trianon to discuss what measures should be taken. It was then decided that the Cardinal should be arrested in the presence of the whole Court on the following day.

That day, August the 15th 1785, was the Assumption of the Holy Virgin, when the Cardinal was to officiate at mass. At twelve o'clock the courtiers, ranged along the Galerie des Glaces, waited for the King and Queen to come out of their apartments and lead the procession to the chapel, where the tapers were already lit for the ceremony. The Cardinal in his Pontifical robes was in the King's Council Room where those who had the *grandes entrées* were assembled. Suddenly he found himself summoned into the King's library, where Louis XVI, Marie Antoinette, the Baron de Breteuil, Miromesnil, Keeper of the Seals, and Vergennes, the Foreign Minister had met in council.

'My cousin,' said the King as the Cardinal came forward, 'you have bought diamonds from Bohmer?'

'Yes, Sire.'

'What have you done with them?'

<sup>1</sup> Rochetierie, 1 519, 520.

'I thought they had been handed over to the Queen.'

'Who entrusted you with this commission?'

'A lady named the Comtesse de la Motte-Valois who presented me with a letter from the Queen, and I thought I should be pleasing her Majesty by undertaking this negotiation.'

At this Marie Antoinette broke in uncontrollably:

'How could you have believed, Monsieur, that I should choose *you*, to whom I have not spoken a word for eight years, to carry out this negotiation and by means of such a woman?'

The Cardinal, white to the lips, answered:

'Sire, I see I have been cruelly taken in. I will pay for the necklace, I detected no fraud.'

And drawing out his pocket-book he took from it the supposed letter from the Queen ordering him to take over the necklace, and handed it to the King.

Louis XVI looked at it and said:

'This is neither the writing of the Queen, nor her signature. How could a prince of the house of Rohan and a Grand Almoner of France think that the Queen would sign herself "Marie Antoinette de France"? Everyone knows that queens only sign their Christian names.' And whilst the Cardinal made an inaudible reply the King handed him a copy of his letter to Bohmer, saying:

'Did you write a letter like this?'

'I do not remember having written it,' the Cardinal answered, running his eyes over the page.

'And if you were shown the original, signed by yourself?'

'If the letter is signed by me it is authentic.'

What further proof is needed that the Cardinal had acted under hypnotic influence? It is well known that the person who is made the subject of such an experiment does not remember afterwards what he has done. The Cardinal, growing still paler and leaning on the table for support, could only stare at the letter in complete bewilderment.

'Explain all this to me,' Louis XVI said kindly, pitying



his distress, 'I do not want to find you guilty, I only want your justification.'

'Sire, I am too overcome to be able to reply to your Majesty. . . .'

'Pull yourself together, Monsieur le Cardinal, and go into my room where you will find pens, ink and paper. Write what you have to say to me.'

The Cardinal obeyed, but after sitting at the writing-table for a quarter of an hour, he returned with a written explanation which was no less confused than his verbal replies.

Then the King gave the order for his arrest. Neither the Cardinal's prayers for mercy nor the interceding of Vergennes, who was for hushing up the affair, could persuade him to leave the Cardinal at liberty. 'I cannot consent,' he said, 'either as King or as husband. The name of the Queen is precious to me; it has been compromised, I must leave nothing undone.'

Outside, the crowd of courtiers waited; the hour for mass had long gone by. Suddenly the door of the King's apartments opened and the Cardinal appeared in his surplice and scarlet cassock followed by the Baron de Breteuil. Then amidst the hush that followed the voice of de Breteuil rang out:

'Arrest Monsieur le Cardinal!'

And a young sub-lieutenant of the bodyguard took the trembling prelate in charge just as he was passing from the *Œil de Bœuf* into the *Galerie des Glaces*. The Cardinal, momentarily recovering his presence of mind, asked for a pencil, and scribbling a few words on a piece of paper handed it to one of his retainers whom he encountered on his way, and dispatched the man with it hastily to Paris. It was an order to the Abbé Georgel to destroy the red pocket-book in which the Cardinal had kept a few of the supposed letters from the Queen. Thus the last trace of the forged correspondence had vanished before the police, acting under the orders of de Breteuil, could place the seals on the papers at the Hôtel de Strasbourg.

The next day the Cardinal was lodged in the Bastille.

Two days later Mme de la Motte was arrested at Bar-sur-Aube and then taken to the Bastille, on August 20; the Baron de Planta was imprisoned there on the same day, Cagliostro and his wife on August 23, d'Oliva on the 27th, but Rétaux de Villette, still abroad, was not captured until March 1786, when he joined the rest of the conspirators awaiting trial.

That the King throughout had acted on his own initiative and not, as Mme Campan supposed, on that of de Breteuil and of Vermond, is shown by the letter Marie Antoinette wrote to her brother Joseph II a week later: 'Everything,' she says, 'was settled between the King and myself, the Ministers knew nothing about it until the moment when the King summoned the Cardinal and questioned him in the presence of the Keeper of the Seals and the Baron de Breteuil. I was there too, and I was really touched by the good sense and the firmness the King brought to bear on the painful sitting. . . . I hope that this horror and all its details will soon be cleared up in the eyes of the whole world.'<sup>1</sup>

It was thus Marie Antoinette who urged the publicity for which the King and Queen have been so much blamed. Yet what would have been said if any attempt had been made to hush up the affair? Would not the conclusion inevitably have been drawn that Marie Antoinette had something to conceal? How could they know that the real truth would not be revealed by the tribunal appointed to administer justice?

For the King, who had the right to judge the prisoners himself, with great magnanimity gave the Cardinal the option of being tried by the Parlement of Paris, and the Cardinal chose the Parlement. This fatal error placed the Queen's good name at the mercy of a tribunal packed with friends and relations of de Rohan, with Freemasons, and enemies of the royal authority, bent on her destruction.<sup>2</sup>

Yet throughout the trial that took place from May 30

<sup>1</sup> *Lettres de Marie Antoinette*, II 76. Letter of August 22, 1785.

<sup>2</sup> Maugras, *Le Duc de Lauzun*, II. 332, Dasté, *op cit.*, p. 115.

to June 1, 1786, the complete innocence of the Queen was clearly established, her supposed signatures on the contract with the jewellers were proved to be forgeries; Rétaux de Villette admitted he had written them himself. Mme de la Motte was convicted of stealing the necklace, d'Oliva of impersonating the Queen in the Scène du Bosquet. By the unanimous decision of the judges Mme de la Motte was then condemned to be publicly whipped by the executioner, branded on the shoulder with the letter V, standing for *Voleuse*, to be imprisoned at the Salpêtrière for life and to have all her goods confiscated. Rétaux was only exiled from France; d'Oliva dismissed with a reproof.

But whilst the wretched instruments were brought to book, no attempt was made to discover the real instigators of the plot to involve the Queen in a public scandal.

The jewellers, who, as M. Funck-Brentano observes, 'behaved very badly throughout the trial,' got off scot-free. Before the judges they repeated the same untruth they had told Mme Campan, that they had dealt directly with the Cardinal over the sale of the necklace, and, in a letter to Vergennes, Bohmer declared that Mme de la Motte had never acted as intermediary. 'Questioned separately,' says M. Funck-Brentano, 'Bohmer and Bassenge both lied and contradicted each other. . . . The jewellers were backed up by Sainte-James, whose interest was identical with theirs, since he had to get back the 800,000 livres advanced by him for the purchase of the diamonds.'<sup>1</sup>

But Sainte-James was an initiate of Cagliostro's lodge of Egyptian Masonry and one of the many rich financiers on whom he could count for support.<sup>2</sup> At the trial Cagliostro himself boasted that he had bankers in every country, such as Sarrasin of Basle and Sancostar of Lyon, who provided him with as much money as he wished.<sup>3</sup> Behind the Affair of the Necklace, observes M. Munier Jolain, was 'a pack of financiers and of Jews.'<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Funck-Brentano, *op cit.*, pp 369, 370

<sup>2</sup> *Mémoire pour le Comte de Cagliostro*, II 36.

<sup>3</sup> Georgel, II 74.

<sup>4</sup> *Op cit.*, p. 167.

Thus, supported by the combined forces of masonry and high finance, both the Cardinal and Cagliostro were released and completely exonerated, leaving the Court without a stain on their characters amidst the cheers of a frenzied multitude who led them to their doors in triumph.

The Cardinal had done nothing to make himself beloved by them, but his public vindication was a direct blow at the Queen and hailed as such by the mob, fed on the calumnies circulated against her. It is true that throughout the whole affair his rôle was merely that of dupe—the dupe of Cagliostro and Mme de la Motte—on this point the verdict of history is unanimous. No one now believes, as Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette were inclined to think at the time, that the Cardinal had consciously taken part in a swindle in order to pay his debts. But his action in entering on what he imagined to be a clandestine correspondence with the Queen, his participation in the Scène du Bosquet and finally his purchase of the necklace without the knowledge of the King, were crimes of *lèse-majesté* so detrimental to the reputation of Marie Antoinette that some years' detention in the Bastille could hardly have been considered too severe a punishment. But the King, having waived his right to imprison him by *lettre de cachet*, was obliged to bow to the decision of the Parlement and content himself with depriving him of his post of Grand Almoner and with exiling him to the Abbaye of Chaise-Dieu. When, at the end of 1788, he was free to return to his château of Saverne, says M. Munier Jolain, 'he made his entry like a king. Civic troops were drawn up in line, there were speeches, rejoicings, illuminations, carousals. Alsace seemed intoxicated with joy. The Jews distinguished themselves by their welcome; they had always favoured this Bishop, he went to their synagogue and thanked them for lighting so many candles in his honour.'<sup>1</sup>

As to Cagliostro, no evidence was brought against him at the trial that could have secured his conviction. To hold

<sup>1</sup> *Op cit*, p 181.

nightly séances invoking the powers of light and darkness, to prophesy that the Cardinal's correspondence with the Queen and his purchase of the necklace would lead to the realization of his ambitions, to hypnotize the Cardinal into imbecility—all this was not to commit offences punishable by law, even if evidence of these practices had been placed before the tribunal. And Cagliostro's supporters were influential enough to prevent any such evidence being brought. In Paris, Freemasonry by this time had become far too powerful for the question of masonic intrigues to be raised. It is true, however, that during the trial Mme de la Motte hinted at Cagliostro's complicity, and the Abbé Georgel adds: 'I think that without knowing it, Mme de la Motte revealed a great truth by insinuating that Cagliostro more than anyone was in the secret of the motives and causes of the necklace being acquired, but this secret has not been revealed either by the Cardinal or Cagliostro, nor by the Baron de Planta nor the secretary Ramon de Carbonnières, nor by the initiates in whom they confided,' therefore Georgel considered it his duty to cover the whole affair with 'the veil of silence' And he goes on to say that even though the initiates afterwards turned against each other, 'they did not allow themselves to utter a word that would have given the clue to this *mystery of iniquity*. The Egyptian lodge of Cagliostro had no doubt, like Freemasonry, its impenetrable sanctuary, and the most sacred oaths shrouded its secrets.'<sup>1</sup> It is curious to find this expression 'mystery of iniquity' used by several contemporaries besides Georgel, in referring to the Affair of the Necklace.<sup>2</sup>

Released from the Bastille, Cagliostro first repaired to Passy, where the Masons of the Amis Réunis and of the Stricte Observance met at the hotel of the Marquis de Boulainvilliers, and here he received a visit from the mystery man Ximenes he had met ten years before in Russia, together

<sup>1</sup> Georgel, II 121

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Montjoie, *Histoire de Marie Antoinette*, I 179, Lescure, *Correspondance Secrète*, I 585.

with another high Mason. 'They asked me,' he said, 'a thousand questions on the affairs of France and of the ill-treatment I had met with in Paris. They added that as Masons of the Strict Observance they were making great efforts to avenge the Templars and that their aims were principally directed against France and Italy and particularly against Rome.'<sup>1</sup>

But Cagliostro had been ordered by the King to leave France, and he now made his way again to England, where he met his friend Lord George Gordon, who had made the famous riots in 1780 and, after his conversion to Judaism, published a libel against Marie Antoinette in the *Public Advertiser* which led to his imprisonment in Newgate.

Finally, Cagliostro met his doom in Rome. Having incautiously tried to propagate his Egyptian Masonry in that city, he was betrayed by one of his disciples and led before the Papal Tribunal. Here he confessed his masonic intrigues, his initiation by the Illuminati, the terrible oaths he had taken, the conspiracy directed against the monarchy of France. At last the whole 'mystery of iniquity' was unveiled. Condemned as a Freemason, Cagliostro was thrown into the fort San Leo, where he died in 1795.

How in the face of this evidence can the famous Affair of the Necklace be looked on as the work of a mere gang of jewel thieves? Beugnot, who was behind the scenes, at first as the friend of Mme de la Motte, asked this question a hundred and fifty years ago: 'Who can conceive that the Parlement should have regarded the Scène du Bosquet at Versailles only as a swindle and those who took part in it merely as swindlers and one dupe?'<sup>2</sup>

In 1785, just after Cagliostro's arrival in Paris, a masonic congress took place in that city at which he and other representatives of the Illuminati were present; in the following year a more secret one was held in Frankfurt, and it was then, on the evidence of French Freemasons present, that

<sup>1</sup> *Vie de Joseph Balsamo*, p. 149

<sup>2</sup> *Mémoires du Comte Beugnot* (1889 edition), p. 74.

the deaths of Louis XVI and Gustavus III of Sweden were planned.

The Comte de Virieu, whose earlier experience at Wilhelmshad had filled him with horror at the designs of these secret associations, saw in the Affair of the Necklace the direct result of the conspiracy against throne and altar, and hurrying to the Baron de Breteuil after the trial said to him: 'Even if I have to go to the Bastille for it I must ask you whether you know what is going on in the masonic lodges, and whether you have taken precautions against the dangers that may result?' But the Minister, lightly executing a pirouette, replied: 'Ah! keep calm, Monsieur, you will not go to the Bastille and the Freemasons will not trouble the State.'<sup>1</sup>

The conspiracy had its agents in the very heart of the Parlement. D'Allonville relates that at the moment the Affair of the Necklace was submitted to its jurisdiction he was at the house of Fréteau, one of its leading councillors, who entered the room saying 'with a revolting air of jubilation: "A great and lucky affair! A swindling Cardinal who, to exculpate himself, admits that he thought himself invited to make love to the Queen. What mire on the crozier and the sceptre! What a triumph for the ideas of liberty! What importance for the Parlement!"'<sup>2</sup>

Thus the attack on the monarchy of France and on Rome as the preliminary to the war on all thrones and altars, prepared in the subterranean chamber of the Illuminati near Frankfurt, had been carried out according to plan.

Eight years later, on June 14, 1794, Emmanuel Marie Michel Philippe Fréteau, aged forty-nine, 'ex-councillor to the heretofore Parlement of Paris, ex-member of the Constituent Assembly, condemned to death as a counter-revolutionary,' took his last glance at liberty triumphant from beneath the blade of the guillotine.

The Occult Power often ends by destroying its own instruments.

<sup>1</sup> Costa de Beauregard, *Le Roman d'un Royaliste*, p. 47. Cf. Barruel, *op cit*,  
 11 332 <sup>2</sup> D'Allonville, 1. 190

## CHAPTER XVI

### MARIE ANTOINETTE AND FERSEN

IT might have been expected that since the trial of the people concerned in the Affair of the Necklace had not only established the innocence of the Queen but shown her to have been the victim of a dastardly plot, a popular reaction would have been brought about in her favour. But on the contrary, the flood of libels which had been poured forth in the spring of 1785 increased in volume after the verdict of the Parlement had been made known, and such was the skill with which her enemies were able to direct public opinion that the people of Paris who, only two years earlier, had proclaimed the warmth of their devotion on the snow pyramid erected in her honour, were now made to believe that the exoneration of the Cardinal in some way implicated Marie Antoinette. This is perhaps the most extraordinary point in the whole affair. Considering every detail concerning the *Scène de Bosquet* and the theft of the necklace came out at the trial, it is difficult to see how the affair could injure her. But the incomprehensible reasoning was advanced that as her name had been connected with a public scandal of this kind she could not be above reproach. Even to this day the saying is often applied to Marie Antoinette, 'there is no smoke without fire,' but since to every proverb a contrary may be found, the answer to this is that 'if one throws enough mud some is bound to stick,' even on the whitest surface. Hamlet expressed the same truth still more aptly in the words: 'Be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny.'

Nowhere was this more true than at the Court of France during the reign of Louis XVI. It has been shown in



earlier chapters that the aspersions on the moral character of the Queen could be traced in the first instance to the King's old aunts, then, particularly after the birth of the Queen's children, to the Comte de Provence, disappointed in his hopes of succession to the throne, although, long afterwards, in the memoir already quoted, he showed the baselessness of the rumours he himself had helped to circulate. But by 1788 it was the Duc d'Orléans who had become the Queen's chief enemy, and the Palais-Royal the centre from which these libels emanated and found their grossest expression in the pamphlets circulating amongst the underworld of Paris.

That such a campaign should have been carried out when a motive could be found in the jealousy and rancour Marie Antoinette's position inspired is at least comprehensible; the really amazing thing is that, in spite of the terrible fate which befell her, this campaign has never ceased, except for a brief period after the Revolution. From the middle of the nineteenth century up to the present day, a flood of pornographic literature has been poured out, relating to the supposed amours of Marie Antoinette. No surer method for filling the pocket of a needy scribbler could be found than to fling mud on the memory of this unhappy woman.

Instead of following in the footsteps of the eighteenth-century pamphleteers who ascribed to the Queen a host of lovers, including nearly every man who approached her, and also accusing her of unnatural affections, her latest libellists, realizing that this farrago of nonsense will not be believed, have adopted the more skilful course of narrowing down the number of her lovers to two or three, or even to one only, for if a single infidelity can be proved against her, the aureole falls from her head none the less surely.

For whatever indulgence may be shown to an ordinary woman on the score that her morals are her own affair, no such excuses can be made for one whose first duty was to give legitimate heirs to the throne of France. A queen belongs to her country, not to herself, and any departure

from this principle would have constituted a crime against the nation. Had such a dereliction of duty been proved against Marie Antoinette, posterity, whilst pitying her sufferings, which no woman however culpable should have been called upon to bear, could no longer have exalted her to the point of veneration the Queen Martyr has occupied. It is as the faithful wife of the King of France and as the mother of his children that Marie Antoinette has become the supreme example of grace and dignity upon the throne, of sublime courage in misfortune.

Fersen then is the one lover assigned to the Queen in modern times, not only by libellists but by writers who, with an innocent fondness for romance, represent Fersen as the *preux chevalier*, his heart wholly given to the Queen and loved by her with a passion nobly held in check so as to admit no possibility of illicit relations.

The truth is, however, that except for the letter from the Comte de Creutz quoted in an earlier chapter saying that in his opinion Marie Antoinette felt a *tendresse* for Fersen on his appearance at the Court in 1778—an opinion confirmed neither by Mercy nor any other ambassador at the time—we know nothing about the origins of this supposed romance. During the three years that followed, whilst Fersen was in America, his letters make no reference to the Queen but show him, on the contrary, to be occupied with other women; a charming Swedish countess had captivated his fancy just before sailing and pretty American girls kept him happy during his stay in the United States.

After his return to France in 1783, when he was given the command of a regiment, he was certainly admitted to the Queen's circle and regarded as one of her particular friends. We are told that 'people talked' of tender glances exchanged between them at Trianon, but M. Desjardins, in his researches on the Queen's society there, whilst enumerating a number of *habitués*, says: 'Nous n'avons pas une seule fois rencontré le Comte de Fersen à Trianon.'<sup>1</sup> The only

<sup>1</sup> Gustave Desjardins, *Le Petit Trianon* (1885), p. 344

incident recorded with regard to this period, suggesting even remotely that she took any sentimental interest in him, is an *on dit* current at the time, that one evening at Mme de Polignac's, the Queen, seated at the piano, sang to a small company of her friends an air from Piccini's opera *Didon*, and that as she uttered the words of Dido to Æneas, 'Ah, que je fus bien inspirée quand je vous reçus dans ma cour!' she looked across at Fersen with evident emotion.<sup>1</sup> M. Geffroy, who relates this incident, places it in 1779, but, as M. Desjardins points out, the opera *Didon* was not composed till four years later,<sup>2</sup> so if it ever happened it must have been after Fersen's return from America. The Duchesse d'Abrantès, who had heard the story from contemporaries, says in reference to it: 'I do not think, however, that this affection was any more than a very lively *coquetterie* of the heart. The Queen was so seriously engaged at the period when she is accused of this liaison with M. de Fersen that it is unbelievable she could have long hours to consecrate to love. How could one love during the infernal existence this unhappy Princess was then leading?'<sup>3</sup>

It is thus evidently just before the Revolution that the famous love affair was supposed to have begun.

At the time it does not seem to have been taken *au sérieux*. For in all the vast collection of memoirs and letters written by people who lived through this period, in all the diplomatic correspondence of the most confidential kind that has since been published, in all the histories by contemporaries, and, most significant point, in the writings of revolutionaries bitterly hostile to the Queen, hardly any references to the question are to be found. Indeed, the only ones I have been able to discover which support the theory of the Queen's love for Fersen are the following.

The Marquise de la Tour du Pin carelessly observes in her Mémoires that 'The Prince de Guéménée . . . passed

<sup>1</sup> A. Geffroy, *Gustave III et La Cour de France*, 1 359.

<sup>2</sup> *Le Petit Trianon*, p. 123.

<sup>3</sup> *Histoire des Salons de Paris* (written about 1837), 1 213, 277.

in the eyes of the world as my mother's lover. But I do not think this was true. . . . The Comte de Fersen, who was said to be the lover of the Queen Marie Antoinette, came to our house nearly every day.' <sup>1</sup>

A woman who could so lightly repeat scandal about her own mother—and who incidentally tells us that the Queen was envious of her complexion—can hardly be regarded as a serious and impartial witness. And again it is only a question of an *on dit*.

The Comte de Tilly, who in his supposed *Mémoires* says the Vicomte de Noailles and the Duc de Lauzun fell in love with her, adds that the only men she 'distinguished' were the Duc de Coigny and the Comte de Fersen. 'These two tender affections . . . I declare on my life to have been the only ones for which she will have to answer before the Sovereign Judge if He reproves and chastises such frailties.' <sup>2</sup>

Yet still Tilly does not assert that Marie Antoinette had a liaison with Fersen; only that she had a 'tender affection for him.'

What has the contemporary d'Allonville to say of this passage? In his opinion Tilly was no less fatuous than Lauzun and his defence of the Queen only a subtle method of attack:

'All that was said of Marie Antoinette in their *Mémoires* by a presumptuous and discontented coxcomb [the Duc de Lauzun] and a bad lot [Tilly] whose vanity made him wish it to be thought he had been in her set, where he would not have been received, are lies as absurd and impudent as those told, believed and repeated by a public indoctrinated by the Palais-Royal, that hotbed of all baseness and all crime.' <sup>3</sup>

Another young contemporary to impugn the Queen's reputation was the Marquis de Boullé, son of the General

<sup>1</sup> *Mémoires*, I, 3

<sup>2</sup> *Mémoires du Comte Alexandre de Tilly* (1828), II, 119. The authenticity of these *Mémoires* is stated to be more than doubtful. see Tourneux, *Bibliographie de la Révolution*, IV, 85

<sup>3</sup> D'Allonville, I, 210

with whom Louis XVI arranged the flight to Varennes. In his *Mémoires*, published 125 years later, he briefly referred to Fersen as the lover of Marie Antoinette.<sup>1</sup> But since he was only nineteen when the Revolution began he can have had no personal knowledge of the matter, and, as M. Henri Welschinger has pointed out, he was obviously repeating what he had heard from the *émigrés* amongst whom he lived and who continued to circulate the scandalous gossip that had been started at Versailles.<sup>2</sup>

It will surely be admitted that none of the chroniclers quoted above can be regarded as very reliable witnesses. Within the last few years, however, the evidence of a contemporary which might at first sight seem to carry more weight, has been given to the world by the publication of the *Mémoires* of Saint-Priest.

François Emmanuel Guignard, Chevalier, then Comte de Saint-Priest, born in 1735, was Minister at Lisbon under Louis XV and returned to France on the accession of Louis XVI, who, influenced by Vergennes, received him coldly. This, he says in his *Mémoires*, 'cut him to the quick.' He was also piqued because in 1787 the Comte de Montmorin was made Minister of Foreign Affairs instead of himself, though he occupied the post of Minister of the King's Household from 1788 to 1790. During the Revolution he took refuge abroad and only returned to France with Louis XVIII at the Restoration.

Still nursing ancient grievances whilst compiling his *Mémoires*, Saint-Priest wrote of both Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette with inconceivable rancour. For whatever his private opinion of their characters might be, their terrible fate should surely have led him to apply the maxim *de mortuis nil nisi bonum*. Yet this is how the former Minister of the King writes of his martyred Sovereign:

'An insignificant face, sullen manners, a noisy laugh, a

<sup>1</sup> Louis Joseph Amour, Marquis de Bouillé, *Souvenirs et Fragments* (1906), i. 190.

<sup>2</sup> Article on 'Marie Antoinette et le Comte de Fersen,' in the *Journal des Débats* for September 13, 1907.

heavy and uncertain way of walking,' etc., and elsewhere: 'Louis XVI had no real goodness of heart except weakness.'<sup>1</sup>

Even Camille Desmoulins had treated the King better than this when he wrote: 'I regarded Louis XVI with admiration because he has virtues, because he did not follow the same path as his fathers, was not a despot and convoked the States General. In the depths of my province I had read in the papers his beautiful words: "What matter if my authority suffer, provided my people are happy?" . . . Personally I liked Louis XVI, but the monarchy was none the less odious to me.'<sup>2</sup>

But it is on the subject of the Queen that Saint-Priest's malevolence reaches its climax; his insinuations with regard to her affection for Mme de Polignac fall little short of the foul libels put out by the gutter press of Paris. Saint-Priest goes on to say that 'after several passing fancies the Comte de Fersen, a Swede by nationality, fixed the heart of the Sovereign.' Then follows the story of Fersen's appearance at the Court in 1778 and the Queen's immediate liaison with him, shown in an earlier chapter to be completely at variance with the account given by the only serious witness of the incident, the Comte de Creutz, who asserts that Fersen's departure for America nipped the affair in the bud and that both Marie Antoinette and Fersen behaved with admirable restraint. 'Une grande passion naissante—et combattue,' comments M. Pierre de Nolhac. But was it even this?

Of what happened on Fersen's return to France in 1783 Saint-Priest has nothing definite to tell us, not a scrap of circumstantial evidence does he bring forward with regard to the supposed liaison, not a single incriminating incident does he quote; only in reference to 1788 or later, when the revolutionary storm was brewing, does he specify occasions when they were seen together, in the following passage:

'The King alone gave his heart and his confidence to his

<sup>1</sup> *Mémoires du Comte de Saint-Priest* (1929), II 49, 62

<sup>2</sup> 'La France Libre,' in *Œuvres de Camille Desmoulins* (1874), I. 120.

wife, in vain might one have tried to attack her where he was concerned, she had found the means for making him agree to her liaison with the Comte de Fersen, and whilst repeating to the King all that she heard the public said about this intrigue, she offered to give up seeing him, which the King refused. No doubt she insinuated that amidst the flood of malignity poured out against her, this foreigner was the only person to be depended on; we shall see later that the monarch shared this feeling. Meanwhile Fersen rode into the park near Trianon three or four times a week, the Queen did the same, and these rendezvous caused a public scandal in spite of the modesty and restraint of the favourite, who showed nothing outwardly and was the most discreet of all the Queen's friends.<sup>1</sup>

So all Saint-Priest can find to say is that surrounded on every side by enemies, the Queen, with the consent and even at the desire of the King, consulted the only man they both felt they could trust, and for this purpose met him, not at some romantic spot in the gardens of the Petit Trianon but openly, on horseback in the park near by! Even if it were true that any such rendezvous were made they could hardly be regarded as compromising, but how are we to reconcile Saint-Priest's statement that they took place three or four times a week and 'caused a public scandal' with the fact that no other contemporary has a word to say about it?

Saint-Priest's *Mémoires* prove nothing except that he was unfaithful to his King; the British law of libel rightly discredits statements made in malice. During his lifetime he had already shown his disloyalty by disparaging Louis XVI, and Montjoie's comments in 1814 might well apply to his recently published *Mémoires*:

'That the Comte de Saint-Priest should have had such an opinion of his King was his own affair, but was it fitting that he should spread abroad an opinion that might weaken the respect which Louis XVI needed? That the enemies of this monarch should have libelled him is not astonishing,

<sup>1</sup> *Mémoires*, II 80.

but that he should have found detractors even amongst those of his Ministers who had sworn him an unalterable devotion, that is what is really deplorable.' <sup>1</sup>

And d'Allonville adds his testimony in the words that Saint-Priest 'neither showed firmness during his Ministry nor fidelity during his emigration.' <sup>2</sup>

The Mémoires of Saint-Priest have, however, provided a powerful weapon for the enemies of Marie Antoinette; the public was not likely to enquire into his record or weigh the value of his evidence; if a former Minister of Louis XVI and an ardent Royalist could be quoted against her, that fact would be held sufficient to convict her.

But let us see the *revers de la médaille*. Against the aspersions cast by careless youth and by embittered age must be set not only the silence of those contemporaries who would have been the first to record any real ground of accusation against the Queen, but the positive assertions of those responsible writers, quoted in an earlier chapter,<sup>3</sup> who expressed their conviction that from the point of view of morals Marie Antoinette was blameless. In general, they do not seem to have attached sufficient importance to Fersen to accord him more than a passing reference or to have considered that the Queen's honour needed any special defending where he was concerned; a few, however, besides the Duchesse d'Abrantès, already mentioned, have touched on the subject in such passages as the following.

The Comte d'Hézecques, a page of Marie Antoinette's, writes: 'If the Queen gave admittance to the Comte de Fersen, MM. de Vaudreuil and de Coigny, old Besenval was also invited. For ten years now all these calumnies have ceased because they have become useless . . . none of the anecdotes circulated at the beginning of the Revolution have been confirmed; these horrors have been buried under the most complete silence. I have questioned, I have listened with as much avidity as prudence, I have consulted

<sup>1</sup> *Éloge de Louis XVI*, p. 143.

<sup>2</sup> *Mémoires*, 1 325

<sup>3</sup> See ante, pp. 165-167.



the people attached to the Court, and everything has confirmed me in my respect for her virtue.' <sup>1</sup>

The Prince de Ligne, after relating how he momentarily lost his head by giving way to a sentiment which 'would have enlightened this charming Queen if she had ever felt it for anyone,' goes on to say: 'Imagine . . . with what horror I saw attributed to her, thanks to infamous libels, the Duc de Coigny, M. the Comte d'Artois, M. de Lamberti, M. de Fersen, Prince George of Hesse-Darmstadt, the Duke of Dorset, Mr. Conway, Mylord Strativen,<sup>2</sup> a few other Englishmen as silly as he was, two or three stupid Germans,' etc. etc. etc. <sup>3</sup>

Thus, in the eyes of this *intime* of the Queen's, Fersen was no more to be regarded as her lover than any of the rest.

All that we know for certain about Marie Antoinette's relations with Fersen before 1789 is in reality so little that it might be contained in approximately the same space that would be occupied by what is definitely known about the life of Shakespeare. In both cases writers, at a loss for facts, have had recourse to surmises or to pure inventions. Not a single letter has been preserved that passed between the Queen and her supposed lover before June 1791, nor has any reference in Fersen's Journal or correspondence been found to substantiate the theory that they were on terms of intimacy until the Revolution had begun; it is only then, when the Queen's life is in danger, that Fersen steps into the limelight as her principal friend and confidant.

At one moment some evidence of the famous romance was believed to have been found in some letters from Fersen to his sister Sophie, discovered by a certain M. de Heidenstam at Lofstad in Sweden and published by him in 1913 in a book entitled *Marie Antoinette, Fersen et Barnave*. Whilst warmly defending the Queen's virtue, M. de Heidenstam saw in these letters proofs of an idyllic love affair, but his lack of

<sup>1</sup> *Mémoires*, p. 17

<sup>2</sup> Lord Suathavon, with whom the Queen had been guilty of dancing Scottish dances at her balls

<sup>3</sup> *Mémoires* (1860), p. 68

on the wrong day, her reply to the King of Sweden's request that he should be given a regiment, whilst during the visit of that monarch to the Court of France in 1784 Fersen is said, without any proof whatever, to have 'been the principal personage at these magnificent fêtes,' and the reason for the favours showered on the Swedes. In the course of a chapter of twenty-five pages, entitled 'The Favourite of Versailles,' twenty-one pages are devoted to Fersen's matrimonial projects with a Miss Lével in London, to his various amorous adventures, his exploits during the American War, etc.; only four relate to his visits to the Court of France, and these consist of well-known quotations, including, of course, the famous letter of the Comte de Creutz, and the insinuations of Saint-Priest. Not a shred of fresh evidence is brought forward to show that Fersen occupied the position the title of the chapter implies.

The only discovery Mlle Soderhjelm appears to have made concerning Fersen's relations with the Queen during the pre-revolutionary era is that, according to a note-book she found amongst Fersen's papers in which he entered the dispatch of his letters, he wrote twice to Marie Antoinette in 1783, twice in 1788, and three times in 1789—seven letters in all, none of which seem to have been preserved. That he should have written to the Queen on his return from America when she had concerned herself with the matter of his obtaining command of a regiment is only natural; it would have been extraordinary if he had not written to thank her. That he wrote again in 1788 and 1789 when the Revolution was beginning is in accordance with what we know of the political rôle he played in her life from that moment onwards. Meanwhile, five years without the record of a single letter! This would certainly seem a serious obstacle to Mlle Soderhjelm's theory. How does she explain it? By assuming that letters entered in Fersen's register as dispatched to 'Joséphine' were in reality addressed to the Queen. Then why on those seven occasions did he enter them under her name? Moreover, Mlle

Soderhjelm herself admits that Fersen numbered no less than three Josephines amongst his acquaintances. The assumption that the name stood for the Queen thus appears to be a pure surmise. Indeed, when Fersen records that he wrote to Josephine ordering her to have a frill made for the stove in his apartments, even Mlle Soderhjelm is obliged to conclude that this injunction could hardly have been addressed to the Queen of France and some other Josephine must here be indicated—but it is impossible to follow Mlle Soderhjelm into all her maze of speculation.

As to the letters to Sophie on which M. de Heidenstam had built up his romance, these are found by Mlle Soderhjelm to have been wrongly attributed by him to the pre-revolutionary epoch and are placed by her, evidently quite correctly, in 1790 and 1791. The evidence they contain can only be examined in conjunction with events taking place at that later date and must therefore be relegated to a further work dealing with Marie Antoinette during the Revolution. It will then be seen what grotesque blunders have been made in the interpretation placed on these and other recently discovered documents belonging to that period.

At this point it is enough to say that *no evidence has yet been produced to prove that Fersen was ever the lover of Marie Antoinette.*

From the time of the Affair of the Necklace the tide of calumny against the Queen continued to increase steadily; henceforth she was 'Madame Déficit,' 'l'Autrichienne,' passing large sums of money to her brother, the Emperor, the devourer of the people's substance, a Messalina involved in countless love affairs. These accusations cut her to the heart. Determined to know the worst, she ordered the police lieutenant of Paris to come every morning and tell her of the libels that had been circulated, and she would sit with streaming eyes listening to the horrible tale. Sometimes, when he hesitated, she would say: 'Go on, Monsieur, do not let my tears stop you. It is only natural I should feel the

evil that is spoken of me and the false opinion formed of me by a people I hoped would love me and for whose happiness the King and I are ready to sacrifice everything.' <sup>1</sup>

Throughout all the popular demonstrations against her she never failed to realize that these were not spontaneous expressions of the people's feelings, and when those around her blamed them she would say: 'Do not speak in this way of the people, they are only misled. Their hearts are better than their heads.'

It seems that in 1786 an attempt was made to injure her even in the eyes of Louis XVI. The King and Queen, says Mme Campan, were so united that this was the only occasion when she ever saw a cloud arise between them. Going into Marie Antoinette's room at Trianon she found her lying on her bed in floods of tears with a number of letters beside her, and as the waiting-woman approached she cried out between her sobs: 'Ah, I wish I could die. . . . Ah, the wicked monsters. . . . What have I done to them?' And when Mme Campan offered restoratives she answered: 'If you love me leave me: it would be best to kill me.' Mme Campan sent for Mme de Polignac; soon after, the Comte d'Artois arrived bringing a message from the King; between them they succeeded in consoling the Queen. The same evening Louis XVI came to supper with her at Trianon . . . the cloud had passed. Mme Campan never discovered the cause of the Queen's despair.

Henceforth Marie Antoinette knew little happiness. The odious Affair of the Necklace and the campaign of calumny that followed after had filled her with sadness, and now even the joy of motherhood, for which she had craved through seven long years, was overcast. The second daughter to whom she gave birth on July 29, 1786, little Madame Sophie, was destined to live only eleven months.

Friendship, too, failed the unhappy Queen. For some years a chill had crept into her relations with the Polignacs. Throughout the new phase of her life that set in after the

<sup>1</sup> Montjoie, *Histoire de Marie Antoinette*, i 182.

birth of her children, more particularly after that of the Dauphin, Marie Antoinette had begun to find the Polignac set less congenial. Though still fond of the Duchesse she shrank from some of her friends. The Polignacs, says the Comte de la Marck, were not careful enough about the people they asked to meet the Queen and she was often grieved at this. One day she ventured to express to the Duchesse her distaste for certain of these people, to which Mme de Polignac, in spite of her gentle nature, had the effrontery to reply: 'I think because your Majesty is good enough to come into my salon, that is no reason she should wish to exclude my friends.' Marie Antoinette, in repeating this remark to La Marck, observed: 'I bear no grudge against Mme de Polignac for this; she is good at heart and she loves me, but the people around her have influenced her' <sup>1</sup>

This being so, the Queen no longer went to Mme Polignac's without having first sent to enquire who was there, and by degrees she appeared there less often, but took instead to frequenting the salon of her lady of the bedchamber, the good and charming Comtesse d'Ossun, where she was much happier than she had ever been with Mme de Polignac.

Meanwhile Marie Antoinette found some consolation for her troubles in the society of the King's unmarried sister, Madame Elizabeth, who alone of all the royal family showed her affection. Never beautiful, and inclined to embonpoint, the young princess, now twenty-four, had remained something of a schoolgirl, jolly, boisterous and thoroughly good-natured. At the same time she was deeply religious. Her letters to the two friends of her childhood, the Marquise de Raigecourt and the Marquise de Bombelles — 'ma chère Bombe,' as Madame Elizabeth called her — form the *Correspondance* through which we know her best and provide a curious mixture of mystical musings and breezy humour. At Montreuil, the charming property on the outskirts of Versailles given her by Louis XVI in 1781,

<sup>1</sup> *Murabeau et la Marck*, 1. 43, 44.

she occupied herself with her farmyard and made it her special concern to provide milk for the orphans of the district. For this purpose she had a number of splendid cows sent from Switzerland, with a young milkman called Jacques to look after them. But Jacques pined for his sweetheart, Marie, he had left behind, so Marie was also brought from Switzerland and the two were married on May 26, 1789. This little incident inspired a popular song beginning: 'Pauvre Jacques quand j'étais près de toi,' with which long afterwards French mothers still sang their little ones to sleep.

Madame Elizabeth was undoubtedly a saint, and her unblemished reputation, which no one dared to assail, has been contrasted with the character for frivolity attributed to Marie Antoinette. But if Marie Antoinette had displayed throughout the piety of Madame Elizabeth, if she had never indulged in those four years of '*dissipation*,' never gambled, never exceeded her dress allowance, never figured on the stage at the Trianon, would she have escaped calumny? When one considers the forces ranged against her one is inclined to answer 'no.' It must be remembered that Madame Elizabeth gave no cause for envy, she had obstructed no one's path to the throne, and she had none of the personal charm and elegance that distinguished Marie Antoinette. A woman who goes like wine to the heads of men is naturally more vulnerable to the tongue of calumny than one whom no one would associate with romance. The episodes of Lauzun, Besenval, Fersen, the Prince de Ligne, the rhapsodies of Burke and Horace Walpole show that, whether strictly beautiful or not, Marie Antoinette had the power of inspiring passionate and almost incontrollable adoration. Madame Elizabeth, on the other hand, whilst never giving cause for scandal, seems also never to have inspired love. At one moment—in 1781—there was a question of her becoming the third wife of Joseph II, but Mercy, ordered to report to the Emperor on her appearance, does not give a very flattering account; she is not yet too fat but may become so—a tendency which, as in the case of

Marie Antoinette, is attributed to her excessive passion for riding—'she does not trouble about her face, which inclines to good looks, all forms of adornment are indifferent to her and seem to give her no pleasure,' she is now better poised and is not so fond of stamping her feet, she is gentle, affable but rather timid, and her education has not included the cultivation of social talents.<sup>1</sup>

The description was not calculated to stimulate the Emperor's ardour and no more was heard of the proposed marriage.

On her part Madame Elizabeth, too much under the influence of the aunts, had been prejudiced against the House of Hapsburg and even to a certain extent against Marie Antoinette. In her remark, 'Our opinions differ; she is an Austrian and I am a Bourbon,'<sup>2</sup> one clearly detects the inspiration of Mme Adélaïde.

Marie Antoinette, however, was very fond of her young sister-in-law and loved to give her pleasure. In the midst of her grief over the death of Madame Sophie, which occurred on June 19, 1787, she invited her to spend the day at Trianon, and Madame Elizabeth, writing to her 'Bombe,' observes: 'There was no attention she did not show me. She had had one of those surprises prepared for me, in which, as you know, she excels. But what we did most was to weep over my poor little niece.' And with a flash of foresight the princess says of Madame Sophie: 'She is very happy; she has escaped all dangers. . . . If you only knew how pretty she was when dying—it is unbelievable. The day before she was still pink and white, not at all emaciated, in fact charming.'<sup>3</sup>

Marie Antoinette felt her loss deeply, though she had never progressed normally and it could not be wished that she should live. Prince George of Hesse-Darmstadt, finding her in tears some months later, asked her how she could grieve

<sup>1</sup> *Mercy et Joseph II*, 1 16

<sup>2</sup> Beauchesne, *Histoire de Madame Elizabeth*, 1 257

<sup>3</sup> *Correspondance de Madame Elizabeth*, éditée par Feuillet de Conches (1868), pp. 98-100.

so bitterly over a child as young and undeveloped as the baby princess; to which Marie Antoinette answered sadly: 'Ah, Monsieur, but she might have been a friend!' <sup>1</sup>

Before long the health of the Dauphin gave rise to anxiety. He, too, had been delicate from birth, but now the conformation of his body, his attacks of fever and the wasting that had set in, seemed to denote rickets or else the tuberculosis from which both his father's parents had died. Marie Antoinette, writing to her brother, the Emperor, on February 22, 1788, about this fresh sorrow, tries to find some consolation in the robustness of the Duc de Normandie: 'As to the younger, he has in health and strength everything his brother lacks; he is a true peasant's child, big and fresh and sturdy'

The King, as devoted to his children as the Queen, shared all her anxieties, and when Madame Royale, then nine years old, fell ill he himself helped to nurse her. In a letter to Mercy written during the agitation for the convocation of the States General, Marie Antoinette says: 'I have been really very anxious about the health of my daughter, her tertian fever has been persistent and I sat up with her for two nights. The King was with me a whole night. The poor little thing said such loving things to us that she made us cry. She is better now.' <sup>2</sup>

So amidst the cares of State that pressed heavily on his shoulders, beneath the shadow of the immense tragedy that brooded over them both, Louis XVI could find it in his heart to watch through the dark hours with the wife he loved, mingling his tears with hers at the bedside of a sick child.

We must now go back and follow the course of events in which he had taken part during the past two years.

<sup>1</sup> Montjoie, *Histoire de Marie Antoinette*, 1 134.

<sup>2</sup> *Lettres de Marie Antoinette*, II. 121 Letter of August 3, 1788.





## CHAPTER XVII

### THE ASSEMBLY OF NOTABLES

IN the summer of 1786 the King had enjoyed a spell of immense popularity during a visit to Normandy. Always an enthusiast for the navy, he set out for Cherbourg to inspect the great port that was in course of construction. The interest he took in this, the knowledge of naval affairs he displayed, the kindness he showed to the people, enchanted his loyal Norman subjects. Nothing delighted them more than the incident of the peasant woman of Houdan. In an ecstasy at the sight of the King she threw herself at his feet; Louis XVI raised her up and asked her what she wanted, taking out his purse to give her alms. But the woman declined the money, saying she had only one favour to ask of him—‘it is to embrace you, Sire!’ and the King ‘consented with the best grace in the world.’<sup>1</sup>

Great preparations had been made for the reception of the King at Cherbourg, and it was said that the cannons announcing his arrival could be heard as far away as the Isle of Wight

His journey there and back through Normandy was a triumphal progress, everywhere he allowed the crowds to gather close around him, calling them ‘my children,’ and to the cries of ‘Long live the King!’ responded gaily with ‘Long live my people! Long live my good people!’

To the Queen he wrote: ‘I am the happiest king in the world, I am loved by my people as much as I love them’<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Correspondance de la Comtesse de Sabran et du Chevalier de Boufflers* (1875), p. 151.

<sup>2</sup> De Falloux, p. 88

The reception he received frankly astounded him; amidst the cabals and intrigues of Versailles and the growing disaffection of the Parisians, he did not realize that the great mass of the nation understood him and appreciated his good intentions.

It seems that there were moments when the hopelessness of reigning, in the face of continual misrepresentation and of deception by his Ministers, filled him with the same despair he had expressed to Malesherbes in the words: 'You are more fortunate than I am; you can abdicate.' Whilst on board a man-o'-war, the *Patriote* at Cherbourg, the wind changed suddenly and the order was given to tack. 'Where would the wind take us?' asked the King. 'To England, Sire.' 'Ah,' Louis XVI said sadly, 'I would go there willingly, the English would not give me a bad reception and in that country they do not deceive their kings' <sup>1</sup>

But his journey through Normandy showed him that, left to themselves, the people were loyal to the core; the centre of disaffection was the Court. As the acclamations died down on his way home he observed drily: 'I see that I am nearing Versailles, but I shall often leave it and go further afield than Fontainebleau.' <sup>2</sup> On arrival at the château he took his sturdy little son, the Duc de Normandie, in his arms, and pressing him to his heart said with a smile: 'Come, my big Norman, your name will bring you luck!' <sup>3</sup>

Those four days with the fleet provided the last happy time Louis XVI was destined to know. Once back at Versailles endless perplexities awaited him. The trouble now centred around Calonne.

The Comptroller General of Finances has been made the subject of almost as much controversy as his predecessors, Turgot and Necker. To this day no one can decide whether he was a genius or a fool. Beauhieu regarded his administration as disastrous, but points out that so responsible a Minister as Bertrand de Moleville sounded his praise and

<sup>1</sup> Lescure, *Correspondance Secrète*, 1 55

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>3</sup> Rocheteau, 1 538

declared his final dismissal to be the immediate cause of the Revolution.<sup>1</sup>

Amongst the most modern writers, M. Casimir Stryiński endorses Maurepas' opinion of him as a spendthrift, whilst M. Jacques Bainville thinks that his 'prodigalities' have been exaggerated and observes that 'in our day Calonne has been almost rehabilitated.'<sup>2</sup>

It is certain, however, that Calonne was extremely unpopular and that his personal character to some extent justified the detestation in which he was held by the people of Paris. Good-looking, with a pleasing expression and a shrewd, penetrating glance, elegant and witty, he nevertheless conveyed the impression of a man not quite used to the rôle of the grand seigneur he wished to appear; his courtly manners were somewhat overdone. But his real crime in the eyes of the people was his supposed encouragement of lavish expenditure by the Court and particularly by the Queen. It was said that one day when she asked him to help a protégé of hers, Calonne replied gaily: 'Madame, if it is possible it is done already; if it is not possible it will be done.'<sup>3</sup> But the Queen had not been told the true state of the finances, and when later the amount of the deficit was revealed she is reported to have said: 'If I had known, I should not have made such purchases'—referring evidently to Saint-Cloud—'and I should have been the first to give the example by reforming my household, but I could form no idea of these straits, since when I asked for 30,000 livres, they sent me 60,000.'<sup>4</sup>

In this respect Calonne had shown no more indulgence than Turgot and Necker and the Queen frankly detested him. It was the Polignacs in whom he found support at the Court. His apparent lavishness in the handling of public funds was all part of his system. Calonne believed that to make a show of opulence would have the effect of restoring

<sup>1</sup> *Essais de Beauheue*, i 3

<sup>2</sup> Stryiński, *Le XVIII<sup>e</sup> Siècle* (1913), p. 299, Jacques Bainville, *Histoire de France* (1924), p. 312

<sup>3</sup> D'Allonville, i 123.

<sup>4</sup> Lescure, *Correspondance Secrète*, II. 125.

public confidence and of bringing more money into circulation. The same idea had led Necker to make perpetual loans. Nevertheless he confided to the King that the finances of the kingdom were in an alarming situation, that the annual deficit stood at 100 millions (£4,375,000) and outstanding loans—which he attributed to his predecessors—amounted to 101 millions (£4,418,750).<sup>1</sup> The figure does not appear to have justified Calonne's alarm, and in view of the enormous cost of the American War, reckoned at approximately 1 milliard livres (£43,750,000) (see ante, p. 241) it is astounding that the deficit was not a great deal larger. According to Necker, Louis XVI had provided interest for loans out of his savings to meet the extraordinary expenses of the war.<sup>2</sup>

For all his apparent frivolity Calonne was not only a far-sighted statesman but a terrific worker, night and day he wrestled with the problem of finance. His carriage on his journeys between Versailles and Paris was transformed into an office where he continued to make his calculations, and when at home he would sit at his writing-table by candle-light, between drawn blinds with his feet in hot water—presumably to draw the blood from his over-heated brain.

The result of his studies was to show him that the only hope of balancing expenditure with receipts was to impose fresh taxes. The King had said firmly 'No loans or taxes,' but Calonne maintained that taxes there must be, only, like Turgot and Necker, he held that they should be made to fall on those best able to bear them, that is to say on the 'privileged classes' The nobles and the clergy should no longer be exempt. But he realized the hopelessness of attempting to obtain the consent of the Parlements, amongst which a number of the privileged were included. Calonne

<sup>1</sup> It is difficult here to give the figures with certainty, for, as usual, both contemporaries and historians disagree. Those quoted here are given by M. Stryenski, d'Allonville, however, says that in putting the deficit at 113 millions Calonne had exaggerated.

<sup>2</sup> John Adolphus, *Biographical Memoirs of the French Revolution* (1799), 1. 24.

and Vergennes therefore proposed to the King that a representative assembly should be convoked to deal with the situation.

This plan of an 'Assembly of Notables,' reminiscent of Henri IV, delighted Louis XVI, and the day after he had given his consent in due form to his Council he wrote to Calonne saying that he had not slept all night for happiness.<sup>1</sup>

Who could have foreseen that this assembly was to pave the way for the States General—the National Assembly and finally the Convention? Unwittingly and with joy in his heart at the thought that at last the grievances of the people would be redressed, Louis XVI, who by his recall of the Parlements had laid the foundation-stone of the Revolution, now added a second block to the edifice.

The Assembly of Notables, which met on February 22, 1787, was composed of 144 members, comprising 7 bureaux, each headed by a prince of the blood. These included 15 bishops and archbishops, 36 representatives of the noblesse, also councillors of State, provincial deputies and municipal officers

The scheme that Calonne, in conjunction with the King, had to put before them was a vast plan of reform, including the suppression or alleviation of the *gabelle* and the *capitations*, a greater equality of taxation which would hit the privileged classes, and the formation of the provincial assemblies proposed earlier by Necker. Calonne thus showed himself no reactionary, and his reforms put forward by anyone but himself would undoubtedly have been greeted with acclamations; unfortunately he was personally too discredited to carry them through. And unfortunately too his principal ally in the Ministry, Vergennes, died nine days before the Assembly met.

Calonne's opening speech was not calculated to win over his opponents; whilst setting forth his reforms in the vaguest terms he seemed to vaunt his own talents and disparage those of his predecessors, particularly Necker, on whom he

<sup>1</sup> Rochetete, 1 556.

made a veiled attack. This added the late Comptroller General, still the idol of the people, to the list of Calonne's enemies.

Before long Calonne, realizing the bad impression he had made on the Assembly, in conversation with the King expressed his apprehension that he would be dismissed like Turgot. But Louis XVI, bent on the proposed reforms, is said to have replied: 'Have no fear; I was a child then, now I am a man.'<sup>1</sup>

Yet once more it was made impossible for the King to stand by his Minister. Calonne, finding resistance stiffening around him, took up an attitude of defiance; called upon to give the actual figures of the deficit, he haughtily refused and soon after published a pamphlet attacking the Assembly. This raised a storm of indignation amongst the Notables, who appealed to the King; a memoir was presented to him by the Prince de Conti—son of the prince who had figured in the *Guerre des Farines*—accusing Calonne of embezzling 80 millions. La Fayette openly denounced him. Necker had already published a counter-attack on his administration. Then came revelations on his immoralities and the sums he had squandered on his mistresses.

These finally decided the King, and on April 8 Calonne received his dismissal. For this Louis XVI has again been charged with weakness, but how could he possibly retain a Minister who had so dishonoured his post? How could he continue to support him in the face of an unpopularity so justly deserved? For Calonne was detested by the people no less than by the Assembly.

Besides, in dismissing Calonne, Louis XVI had not abandoned his projects of reforms, and in the eyes of the King it was these and not their promulgator who mattered. For the reforms of Calonne were in their essence those that Louis XVI had always desired and to which through successive Ministries he had given his support. Calonne had merely given them shape and performed the arduous

<sup>1</sup> Lescure, *Correspondance Secrète*, II 116.

task of working out the technical details by which they might be introduced. His plan for taxation comprised two principal edicts: (1) the *subvention territoriale*, or tax on landed property and seigniorial rights—the first step towards the abolition of inequality in taxation by making the privileged classes contribute their fair share to the revenues; and (2) the *tambre*, or stamp on contracts and patents. Both these were well thought out and the King had no intention of letting them drop.

At a loss to find an immediate successor to Calonne, Louis XVI himself temporarily appointed an honest old man named Fourqueux, too infirm to carry on for long, and the Archbishop of Toulouse, Loménie de Brienne, was then proposed as Comptroller General. This prelate, who distinguished himself in the Assembly of Notables as the enemy of Calonne, was generally regarded as a man of great ability. Both Turgot and Malesherbes had desired him as a colleague in 1775; Joseph II and Mercy had spoken with admiration of his talents.<sup>1</sup>

Louis XVI, however, had always been prejudiced against him on account of his reputation for irreligion. When, some years earlier, it had been a question of making him Archbishop of Paris in succession to Christophe de Beaumont, the King said abruptly: 'But the Archbishop of Paris must at least believe in God!' <sup>2</sup> and the excellent de Juigné was appointed in his stead. Louis XVI did not either wish for him as Comptroller General, partly because he objected to ecclesiastics in his Council, holding that their sphere lay outside politics.

But de Brienne had powerful supporters both amongst the Notables and at the Court, and, according to the Abbé Georgel, to these were now added those of Necker who, knowing that the King's aversion to the Genevese banker stood in the way of his recall, made a compact with the Archbishop that after occupying the post for a short time he would resign in favour of their candidate. Louis XVI,

<sup>1</sup> Stryiński, *op. cit.*, p. 313, Rocheterie, 1. 562.

<sup>2</sup> Rocheterie, 1. 561.



oblivious to these intrigues, ended by yielding to what he had been led to believe was the general desire; besides, the Queen gave de Brienne her support. It was not, as has frequently been stated, that she secured his appointment, but that convinced of his ability by Mercy and her brother, the Emperor, she replied to the King's announcement that he had decided to appoint the Archbishop of Toulouse: 'I have always heard M. de Brienne spoken of as a very distinguished man and I shall be pleased to see him enter the Ministry.'<sup>1</sup>

Accordingly, on May 1787 Loménie de Brienne took control of the finances and consented to give the information refused by Calonne on the amount of the deficit, which was now found to stand at 140 millions. Brienne then asked for a loan of 60 millions, promising economies in the King's Household to the amount of 40 millions. This was granted, but when it came to promulgating the two edicts of Calonne, Brienne encountered the same resistance as his predecessor.

The Assembly of Notables then broke up on the 25th of May.

Brienne continued, however, to push the necessary reforms with the Parlement, but the Parlement refused as obstinately as the Assembly to register the edicts on the property and stamp tax. The extraordinary point here is that the people, oblivious to their own interests, sided with the Parlement, merely because any opposition to the royal authority now met with their approval.

The King then held a 'bed of justice' in order to force the edicts through. The people stigmatized this as 'an instrument of despotism.' The Parlement, still proving recalcitrant, was exiled to Troyes, but the need for money necessitated its recall and the two edicts had to be withdrawn. The people, in a transport of joy, burnt the effigies of Calonne and Mme de Polignac, and would have burnt that of the Queen if they had not been prevented by the police. The cry of 'Mme Déficit!' went up again; yet Marie Antoinette

<sup>1</sup> *Mirabeau et la Marck*, 1 40

was well known to be the enemy of Calonne! This extraordinary wrong-headedness of the Paris populace must be taken into account when estimating the difficulties encountered by Louis XVI in the introduction of reforms.

Brienne, unable to raise money to meet the deficit by the two edicts for taxation of the privileged classes, now proposed a fresh loan of 420 millions. The edict embodying this demand was put before the Parlement at a Séance Royale on November 19, 1787, and, the majority having seemed to agree, Louis XVI ordered the edict to be recorded. Thereupon the Duc d'Orléans declared the King's action to be illegal. The insolence with which this protest was uttered roused even the gentle spirit of Louis XVI to wrath, and on the advice of Marie-Antoinette the Duke was exiled to his château at Villers-Cotterets. Through the intercession of his sister-in-law, the Princesse de Lamballe, with the Queen he was soon after allowed to return to his château of Raincy.

For six months matters remained at a deadlock; Brienne, exhausted by the struggle, took to his bed, contemplating retreat. The King, however, held his own with unwonted firmness. By the spring of 1788 a fresh project was formed for breaking the resistance of the Parlements by reducing them to their original functions of magistrates and forming another Assembly to deal with laws and taxation. Rumours of this intention soon reached the country and set it in a fever of agitation. On May 3, 1788, the Parlement held a meeting of protest and now asked that the *États Généraux* (States General) should be convened. The principal promoters of this demand, d'Eprémesnil and a fellow-councillor, having expressed themselves with violence and denounced the King's Ministers, were arrested during the following night—a proceeding which naturally endeared them to the people as martyrs of despotism.

Louis XVI, however, persisted in his plan, and at a 'bed of justice' on May 8 the powers of the Parlement were curtailed. At the same time Courts of Justice under the

name of *Grands baillages*, and a Plenary Court to deal with the laws and the raising of loans, were decreed.

The result was a storm of protests throughout the country, and the cry for the summoning of the States General went up on all sides. Brienne, who had declared: 'I foresaw everything, even civil war,' now gave up the unequal contest, and on August 8 the King on his advice announced by an order-in-council that the States General would meet on May 1, 1789. Loménie de Brienne then resigned as arranged and persuaded the King to recall Necker to the post of Comptroller General of Finances.

Thus the edicts of Calonne which paved the way for the reforms that would have redressed the most crying grievances of the people, the inequality of taxation, and those of Brienne that would have broken the resistance of the Parlements, were set aside amidst the rejoicings of the Paris populace.

On November 6 the Assembly of Notables was again convoked to deliberate on the popular demand that the number of deputies representing the *Tiers État*—or Third Estate, that is to say, the bourgeoisie and people—should equal that of the two privileged orders combined. This measure, which was to give a large preponderance to the revolutionary elements, was opposed by an immense majority of the Notables, but met with support from the Comte de Provence and his followers.

On December 27, however, Necker presented his *Compte Rendu* to the King in which he urged the double representation of the *Tiers État*, and the King, always too prone to favour the people at the expense of the noblesse and who had been persuaded that the *Tiers État* was absolutely loyal to the throne, appended his consent to the fatal measure.

So both Assemblies of the Notables broke up without having accomplished anything. At the same time great reforms had been carried through by the King and his Ministers.

The edict of June 27, 1787, abolishing the *corvée*, had done away with one of the most hated relics of feudalism.

In August of the same year further reductions were made in the King's and Queen's households, in the stables and in the personnel of the royal chase, creating great discontent at the Court. The Comte de Vaudreuil lost his post as Grand Falconer, the Duc de Coigny his as First Equerry to the King.

In November Louis XVI, by edict, accorded religious liberty to all non-Catholics. The Jews had already been relieved of the dues and other forms of servitude to which they had been subject under the old régime by a decree of January 1784.

All these reforms had been brought about on the initiative of the King under such Ministers as Calonne and Brienne; the injustice of giving Turgot and Necker all the credit for those accomplished during their terms of office is therefore apparent. From the moment of his accession Louis XVI had shown himself a sincere and untiring reformer and his measures were carried through with the greatest firmness, often in the teeth of determined opposition and at the cost of his popularity amongst the most powerful sections of the community. The liberty of conscience accorded to the Protestants roused not only the Church but the Parlement against him, but to the remonstrances presented to him by the President of this assembly he answered resolutely: 'I give the order to my Attorney-General to carry my edict to my Parlement; I desire that it shall proceed without delay with its registration.'

Although the King had been unable to do away with all feudal abuses, he had set the example, and it was thus that on December 20, 1788, the noblesse and clergy came forward and in a letter to the King offered to renounce all their pecuniary privileges. Had this sacrifice been accepted and the great injustice of inequality of taxation removed, half the reforms enforced during the Revolution would by this time have been peacefully accomplished, and the rest must

have followed without an upheaval disastrous both to monarchy and people.

But Necker, bent on winning popularity for himself, brushed all such voluntary sacrifices aside, and, instead of co-operating with Louis XVI in his desire for sane and gradual reforms, manœuvred the King into the background and took up his position as the saviour of the people.

Louis XVI had thus gained no credit for his efforts, and except for the mild applause that greeted his appointment of Necker he had won no popularity by yielding to the demand for the convocation of the States General. On the contrary, his prestige was now lower than ever.

But it was the Queen against whom hostility was particularly directed. Although she had effected economies in every direction, in her household, her stables, her dress—it was said she had actually dismissed Mlle Bertin—she was still Mme Déficit, responsible for every evil that afflicted the State.

This idea of attributing the ruin of French finances to the extravagance of the Queen is so absurd that it is difficult to understand how it could be taken seriously by anyone. The English contemporary John Adolphus calculated that in the course of her reign of eighteen years her total expenses amounted to about ten million livres, which he gives as equivalent to £437,500, and in this he includes all that was spent on Trianon and Saint-Cloud, but from which he points out that the sale of La Trompette, which made a return of six millions, must be deducted, leaving a total of four millions or £175,000, a sum 'too inconsiderable to deserve notice.' This may be a conservative estimate, but even supposing she had spent twice that amount, or if, in 1788, on the eve of the Revolution her expenses had amounted to half a million pounds sterling, say £36,000 a year—and they certainly cannot have attained that sum—how could this have affected the finances of a country so rich as France, a country which had been able to finance the American War to the amount of nearly 44 millions sterling and of

which, after that, the deficit in 1789 stood at only 160 million livres or £7,000,000?

As soon as the greater necessity for economy became apparent, after de Brienne had made his report on the finances in 1787, Marie Antoinette had not only reduced her own household but had resolutely supported the economies to be made in that of the King. When her friend, the Duc de Coigny, made a furious scene at the loss of his emoluments as First Equerry, Marie Antoinette defended the action of Louis XVI. The Duc, says Besenval bitterly, was thus sacrificed to ideas of economy. It was also at the desire of the Queen that the Duc de Polignac resigned his office as Postmaster-General.<sup>1</sup>

Marie Antoinette has been persistently represented as the opponent of reforms, but what reforms did she oppose? The truth is that she actually alienated the sympathy of the noblesse by her support of the popular cause. It was she who sent for Necker on the resignation of de Brienne and overcame the King's resistance to his recall. This was not owing to a desire on her part to interfere in affairs of State, but because Necker, having approached her in 1781 when he resigned his post, looked to her for his reinstatement. On August 25, 1788, the Queen said in a letter to Mercy: 'I have just written three lines to M. Necker asking him to come here to-morrow at 10 o'clock. There must be no hesitation; if to-morrow he can set to work so much the better, for it is very urgent. I tremble—forgive me for this weakness—at the thought that it is I who am recalling him. My fate is to bring bad luck [*mon sort est de porter malheur*] and if infernal machinations make him fail again or if he weakens the authority of the King, I shall be still more detested.'<sup>2</sup>

At the same time Marie Antoinette supported the King's decision to summon the States General. The orders to Necker written out in her hand contain the words 'The

<sup>1</sup> Besenval, *Mémoires* (1827 edition), II 258-260, 314.

<sup>2</sup> *Lettres de Marie Antoinette*, II 127.

King is firmly resolved to hold the *États* at the appointed time and to concert with them on the means for making good the deficit and preventing its recurrence. . . . If M. Necker thinks that further retrenchments can be made he can be sure that the King will consider no personal cost to himself.<sup>1</sup>

More than this, the Queen actually approved of the double representation of the *Tiers État*<sup>2</sup> and is reported to have said to de Brienne before witnesses: 'The King wishes the French people to be free and happy, and they shall be!'<sup>3</sup>

The idea of representing Marie Antoinette as a 'reactionary' is therefore seen in the light of facts to be absurd. It may well be said she was mistaken, but she erred on the side of democracy, not of despotism. Inclined like the King to distrust the noblesse, and convinced, as he was, that the *Tiers État* was loyal at heart, she felt that the royal authority would suffer no damage at its hands and that the true desires of the people would be fulfilled.

But the people showed her little gratitude, no cries of 'Vive la Reine!' mingled with those of 'Vive Necker!' when the Minister, leaving her apartment after the interview that secured his appointment, was acclaimed by a frenzied multitude assembled in the courts of the château and the streets of Versailles.

On the other hand, the noblesse and the princes of the blood could not forgive the favour she had shown to the *Tiers État*, and from this moment the Comte d'Artois treated her with coldness.

Now more than ever her foes were those of her own household. The Comte de Provence, whose bureau in the Assembly of Notables had been the only one to support the double representation of the *Tiers État*, showed no appreciation of the Queen's broad-mindedness and continued to vilify her behind her back, whilst maintaining a surface urbanity in her presence. His palace of the Luxembourg

<sup>1</sup> *Lettres de Marie Antoinette*, II 126 Letter of August 24, 1788.

<sup>2</sup> Rocheterie, I 578 <sup>3</sup> *Le Fléau des Tyrans*, p. 31.

became one of the principal centres for the circulation of libels against her. The Comtesse de Provence and her sister, the Comtesse d'Artois, remained coldly malevolent.

As to the aunts, only two were now left alive. Madame Sophie, a mere cypher, had died in 1781. Madame Louise, the Carmelite, passed away in the odour of sanctity on November 25, 1787; it was said that she died of grief at the liberty given to the Protestants. Mme Campan relates that on her death-bed she was heard to exclaim: 'To Paradise, quick, quick, at full gallop!'—imagining in her delirium that she was giving orders to her coachman. But charitableness does not seem to have been amongst her saintly virtues and her convent of Saint-Denis became a hotbed of malicious gossip about Marie Antoinette. After her death Madame Adélaïde, the most vindictive of the sisters, lived on with Madame Victoire at Bellevue, where the King, outraged by her attempts to turn him against the Queen, had requested her to remain in retreat. Her enforced isolation, however, only increased her rancour, and Bellevue became the centre of the intrigue that had been known as the 'comité de Saint-Denis.'<sup>1</sup>

So in this year of 1788, before the final cataclysm, Marie Antoinette found herself more than ever isolated at the Court. And now to her enemies amongst the royal family was added another, more powerful for evil than either Madame Adélaïde or the Comte de Provence—the Duc d'Orléans.

Louis Philippe Joseph, formerly Duc de Chartres, had succeeded his father, the Duc d'Orléans, in 1785, and had accumulated a number of grievances against the Queen. First of all she had snubbed him when he dared to make love to her some years earlier, then during the visit of the Archduke Maximilian in 1775 she had written the arrogant letter to his father putting the princes of the blood in their place. After that there was the affair of the naval battle at

<sup>1</sup> Rocheterie, 1 586, Comte Horace de Viel Castel, *Marie Antoinette et la Révolution Française* (1859), p. 179.



Ouessant, when the Duke was accused of hiding in the hold, and, whether this was true or not, had distinguished himself so little as a sailor that it had been impossible to make him grand admiral of the fleet as he had hoped. The Duke attributed this also to the Queen, although as a consolation she had him appointed to the post of colonel-general of Hussars. Then she had prevented a marriage being arranged between his daughter and the young Duc d'Angoulême, son of the Comte d'Artois. Finally she had urged his exile to Villers-Cotterets. All this was enough to inflame the dissolute and ambitious Duke with a violent hatred of Louis XVI, and especially of Marie Antoinette.

I have described elsewhere the plan of the Orléaniste conspiracy for a change of dynasty with the object of placing the Duc d'Orléans on the throne of France, and it need not be recapitulated here.<sup>1</sup> All that is essential to indicate is the reason why the Duke proved a more formidable enemy than the Comte de Provence, who had hitherto taken the lead amongst the princes of the blood in blackening the character of the Queen.

It was as Grand Master of the great Masonic body, the Grand Orient of France, that Philippe d'Orléans and his supporters were able to construct the invisible network that soon covered all France. The ancient grudge against Church and Monarchy for the condemnation of the Templars and the determination to avenge the death of their Grand Master, Jacques du Molay, in 1310, which played so large a part in French Freemasonry, had been transformed by the Orléanistes into an attack on the person of Louis XVI. Meanwhile the adepts of the Bavarian Illuminati had succeeded in penetrating the lodges and in turning the subversive projects of the Freemasons to the profit of the gigantic scheme of Weishaupt for world revolution.

As early as 1786 the Marquis de Luchet had written his amazing *Essai sur la Secte des Illuminés* which was published in the spring of 1789. It is impossible to attribute to mere

<sup>1</sup> *The French Revolution*, pp 9-19.

chance the fact that, even before the Revolution had begun, he was able to foretell its principal developments—‘the high roads covered with *émigrés*,’ the subjugation of the King to ‘an ambitious and fanatical horde which has taken possession of his will,’ the Jacobin Ministry of 1792, the devastation of France in 1793 and the reduction of the population, even the actual words uttered by the people around the tumbrils that carried the demagogues to the scaffold.

Yet in the face of this warning the Government erected no barriers, sent forth no counterblasts to the flood of seditious pamphlets put out by the Palais-Royal to inflame the minds of the populace; as always throughout the whole course of world revolution, all the energy, all the eloquence, all the finance, all the organising ability were on the side of destruction.

Even after de Luchet’s prophecy had been justified by events and the Reign of Terror carried out before the eyes of a horrified world, the governments of Europe remained blind to the workings of the great conspiracy against monarchy, against law and order, morality and religion everywhere. It was thus that in 1819 Lombard de Langres showed in terrible words the danger that Illuminism still presented:

‘We repeat it, the Sect must subjugate the Universe; there is no longer a question of resisting it, it already holds the blade and the power. The vast and criminal conspiracy which it has planned still needs to be supported in some countries by artifice, seduction and perfidy. Immoral writings, incendiary maxims in which the vices of the multitude are flattered and healthy ideas, forms of worship and kings are attacked under every form, prepare the complement of the universal revolution contemplated for fifty years. . . .

‘Profound politicians, remember that the Illuminés to-day dispose of the four quarters of the world; that their missionaries have penetrated into the burning zone of another hemisphere and that the emancipation of all the colonies is

inevitable. Remember that they are everywhere, in the clubs and in the councils, in the government and in the army, that there are some in the Parliament of England, in the American Congress, in the Escorial and even in the seraglio of Constantinople. The Kings are slumbering on their thrones, and were they to awake! . . . It is too late!!!'<sup>1</sup>

Faced by this formidable power, what hope was there for Louis XVI? As Virieu had declared after the Congress of Wilhelmsbad in 1782: 'The conspiracy has been so well planned that it will be impossible for the Monarchy and the Church to escape.'

The Assembly of Notables was the supreme attempt of the King to complete the work of reform by peaceful means, but, outmanœuvred by the cunning brains of the conspirators, that attempt had failed. Henceforth, with a body of legislators at their command, they were to counter him at every turn. In vain the King might look for support to the representatives of the people he himself had summoned; in establishing their authority he had destroyed his own power to bring about the regeneration of France.

<sup>1</sup> *Des Sociétés Secrètes en Allemagne*, p 201.

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